Safeguarding the rights of workers

David d'Lima JP BTh Dip Ed

- August 2008 -

Fair wages for fair work.
Love thy neighbour as thyself.
A ray of hope for the match workers.



- Image and words from the covers of boxes of matches made safely by the Salvation Army match factory in 1891

Wisdom for the workplace

History contains many examples of workplace injustice, such as the poor payment and harsh treatment of workers, and their placement in dangerous situations. Those problems have occurred within capitalist or free-market contexts, and in socialist or centrally-planned economies, whenever fiscal ideologies are applied without the restraining influence of Godly wisdom.

According to the tendency of a sinful world, the unbridled or unsupervised free-market economy tends to elevate profit above people. Workers in such contexts often toil unsafely and for poor pay. Similarly the lethargy, lack of local autonomy, and the absence of choice in centrally-planned economies have undermined workplace reforms, along with the rights of workers. In the worst cases, enslavement and fatal workplace brutalities have occurred in capitalist and socialist economies. As workers suffer, so do families and communities, hence workplace trouble has consequences wider than those facing the individual. But when workplaces are enriched by the wisdom and justice of God, work can be powerfully transformed to benefit everyone.

Though workplace injustice occurs within every nation, it has particularly afflicted contexts that have not accepted the Judeo-Christian worldview. In contrast, the nations influenced by divine wisdom have greatly reduced the risk of workplace oppression. Wise counsel in those situations has helped to challenge and reform government regulations, along with the actions of private enterprise. The business and public sectors in those countries have largely embraced the responsibility to ensure employment is safe, and justly remunerated. Central to the process is a theology of workplace reform that is founded upon a thorough comprehension of the biblical worldview.

A theology of workplace leadership

Our creator, judge and redeemer has given testimony of his love for working that defines the goodness of work. God as creator saw six times that his work *was good* (Genesis 1:4-25) but having made people as his stewards, God saw *it was very good* (1:31). Although he spoke to judge sinners, saying: *Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it* (3:17), as our redeemer he keenly breaks curses. Moses therefore stated, *The LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands* (Deuteronomy 2:7) as he wants to restore all people, and settle them in *very good* workplaces.

So delivering his oppressed people from Egypt, God said, *"I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering"* (Exodus 3:7). Accordingly the Hebrew leaders spoke up to defend the workers who were required to make bricks but were not given any straw: *Then the Israelite foremen went and appealed to Pharaoh: "Why have you treated your servants this way? ... Your servants are being beaten, but the fault is with your own people"* (Exodus 5:15-16). Those workers challenged their unjust masters, and they went on strike, taking all their entitlements!

Employers must operate justly, heeding the warning stated in Job 31:13-14: *"If I have denied justice to my menservants and maidservants when they had a grievance against me, what will I do when God confronts me? What will I answer when called to account?"*. Moreover, God our judge strongly said, *"I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages"* (Malachi 3:5). Clearly employment injustice is akin to perjury, marital infidelity, and witchcraft!

Concern about workplace oppression is also made in the New Testament. So according to James: *The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty* (5:4). Similarly the Apostle Paul said, *Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair because you know that you also have a Master in heaven* (Colossians 4:1), and *do not threaten them* (Ephesians 6:9). Paul however disapproved of slavery, and told slaves: *if you can gain your freedom, do so* (I Corinthians 7:21). But the ideal is for employers to treat workers so well that each one will say, *"I do not want to leave you," because he loves you and your family and is well off with you* (Deuteronomy 15:16). As the people of God have upheld such enlightened concepts of work, many nations have embraced profound workplace reform.

Christian efforts to secure workplace reform

God's people historically have provided leadership to bring safety and fair remuneration to the workplace. This occured through the medieval guilds and associations, and then through the activities of the trade union movement that has applied Godly wisdom to challenge government and industry.

In response to workplace injustice, British Christians formed the first modern union, in 1833. Beneath a giant sycamore tree in the village of Tolpuddle, the preacher George Loveless and several other Methodist Christians sought fair wages - but were arrested for unlawful assembly. Convicted of administering unlawful oaths, six were transported to Australia. But following public outcry, including many petitions to Parliament, the government remitted the sentences and the union movement grew to became a valued feature of society.

Further challenge to government occurred in the mid 1800s as the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury took action to alleviate workplace exploitation, especially of women and children. Applying Christian conviction, he stood as God's servant in Parliament. This helped society cease sending boys up chimneys, and to no longer set young children to mining underground in awful conditions.

But Christian wisdom can directly reform a workplace, aside from involving Parliament. So in 1891 the Salvation Army tackled Britain's hazardous and badly paid match industry, whose workers suffered from exposure to a toxic form of phosphorus. Establishing a match factory excelling in occupational health and safety, the Salvation Army paid its workers well. It reformed the entire industry by influencing consumers to buy only safely made matches.

Building on such formative actions, the modern union movement has helped check the excesses of the free market - by tackling unsafe, unreasonable and unfair conditions, wrongful dismissal, and the non-payment of entitlements including compensation for injury. Unions have given a first line of response to workplace disputes and brought resolution before matters have escalated. Australian unions in 1856 secured the eight hour day (a world-first reform that became adopted internationally), and they helped Aboriginal stockmen obtain the same wages as non-indigenous workers in the cattle industry, in 1966.

Like all organisations, the trade unions are vulnerable to corruption and they require ongoing renewal and reform. Affirmation of their historic Christian foundation will help minimise the likelihood of heavy-handed action or such unwarranted influence as forcing worksites to hire only unionised labour.

Enriching the workforce and reforming the workplace

Great ministry opportunities arise as God's people seek to bless the workforce or reform the workplace. This is because Christian and unbelieving workers respond positively to pastoral support and personal affirmation, as their God-given desires to shape exciting and meaningful work practices are nurtured.

Regarding the workforce, Christian leaders may encourage workers, managers and business owners as a basis for applying the following ministry activities:

- Appointing and supporting a chaplain in a local business or factory;
- Running workers' education courses and life-skills enrichment classes;
- Holding lunchtime Bible studies or prayer meetings in the workplace;
- Inviting workers who are members of a church to address a service.

Regarding the workplace, Christian leaders may become well-positioned to share wisdom for reform, once their pastoral excellence has brought credibility and trust. Reforming input may include the following actions:

- Enriching the character and leadership abilities of business managers;
- Facilitating corporate well-being and workplace harmony;
- Encouraging Christians to join and support the trade union movement;
- Hosting seminars on marketplace theology and Godly stewardship;
- Promoting ethical trading and ecologically sustainable production.

Utilising Labour Day as a gospel opportunity



Every year the people of God could sponsor a public witness and celebration that is based on Labour Day. Gathering the neighbourhood's workers and families for a lunch, quiz night or street party, we may describe how reasonable hours, fair pay and safe practices were secured by Christian reformers, among whom were the pioneer unionists known as the **Tolpuddle Martyrs**.

At Labour Day celebrations we may explain how workplace reforms honour Jesus the former carpenter, whose *Father is always at his work* (John 5:17). We may echo the teaching, *"the worker deserves his wages"* (Luke 10:7), and reveal the one who stands in the place of all in need (Matthew 25:45).

FamilyVoice AUSTRALIA
4th Floor, 68 Grenfell St, Adelaide SA 5000
ddl@fava.org.au www.fava.org.au
Phone: +618 8223 6383

Bible quotations from the New International Version © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society - used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.