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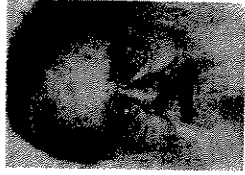
EASTERN OKLAHOMA CATHOLIC

**Diocesan**

## Father J. Paul Donovan

# Reflections on Labor Day

Samuel Gompers, father of the American Labor Movement, said, "Labor Day is distinct. All other holidays are devoted to a man/woman (hero), a military victory, some religious event, race or nation. Labor Day is a celebration of work and the men and women who perform it."



Labor Day has its roots in the last of the 19th century. Starting with a parade Sept. 5, 1882, in New York City planned by the Central Labor Union, the movement grew throughout the United States in the next few years. Oregon in 1887 passed the first state law declaring it a holiday. The U.S. Congress, on Jan. 28, 1894, passed a similar law for Washington D.C. and U.S. territories.

What was happening in the United States to drive this? After the Civil War and for the rest of the 19th century, the country was undergoing profound changes. A huge influx of immigrants, rapid growth of industry and urbanization were changing our nation from an agricultural to an industrial society.

With this development, the worker/owner relationship was changing in a radical manner. The farmer/hired man, shopkeeper/assistant were becoming the steel, coal, railroad industries with thousands of employees. Laissez faire capitalism was dominant. The worker was becoming a number, not a co-worker, and ownership and labor were looked upon in a different way.

Profit became the major determination of good business practice. The less workers were paid, the greater the profit.

Long hours – 80-90 hours a week – and dangerous working conditions were common.

After 1870, workers began to try to organize. Owners were irate and used the government, Army, police, thugs and the courts to keep the workers from forming unions.

This struggle went on for the next 60 years and eventually allowed the right to unionize and form union shops. This gave a great boost to labor, and the powerful unions were built: the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Unions.

In 1946, the Republicans gained control of Congress for the first time since 1932, and in 1947 they passed – over President Harry Truman's veto – the Taft-Hardy Act.

One key provision allowed states to outlaw union shops, which are established when a majority of workers, by free election, win the right to organize and bargain collectively with management.

In a union shop, a person does not need to be a union member to be employed, but after employment must join the union. A number of states passed laws outlawing union shops (including Oklahoma) and gave it the local-sounding name of "The Right to Work Law."

From the 1960s to the present, unions have been decreasing in influence and membership. It seems to me our country is going through a profound social and economic change similar to the shift from an agrarian to an industrial society.

Today, the shift is from industrial to technological global society. We have sent much of our industrial base overseas. Again, free market capitalism – "Why pay a worker a decent living, health care and retirement benefits when we can move

to another country and pay one-tenth the wages?" – is the name of the game.

Our workforce is less secure, must pay for their own retirement, often without medical insurance, and because of a lack of worker organization, it has become the individual worker dealing with the employer, which is not really an equal relationship.

What is to be done? I know our national culture is extremely individualistic, but an individual cannot deal equally with multimillion-dollar companies. One evidence of this is that real wages in the United States, adjusted for inflation, are at the same level as in 1974.

What is the role of the Church? As Catholics, we have strong teaching on such social issues as a right to a living wage, medical care and the right to organize. We have a great wealth of papal teaching, council documents and statements from the U.S. bishops.

The problem is, most Catholics – including many bishops and priests – are unaware of these resources or choose to ignore them.

We often hear the phrase, "cafeteria Catholics," which means we pick and choose what Church teaching we accept. The problem is that the practice is not limited to sexual matters and abortion but also seems to be in effect in the matter of justice and social teachings.

*Father J. Paul Donovan, pastor emeritus of St. Henry Church in Owasso, will celebrate his 50th anniversary as a priest in May 2008.*

# Job opportunities