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## Catholic Labor Education and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists: Instructing Workers to Christianize the Workplace

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*This article analyzes the effect of the American Catholic Church, through its program of specialized labor education, on the growth and development of organized labor in the twentieth century. With the proclamation of Pope Pius XI's encyclical Quadragesimo Anno (1931), he requested that the Church complete the work began by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 with his landmark social encyclical Rerum Novarum.*

*However, the American interpretation and utilization of the social encyclicals varied from their intended European meaning. The cumulative effect of these two encyclicals was support for the workers' rights to organize and create Christian labor associations. From these papal social encyclicals evolved the diocesan labor schools that existed in many Catholic dioceses in America from the early 1930s until the 1970s. Their purpose was to assist workers through education in the basics of labor organizing and management and to provide philosophical and religious instruction. The ultimate purpose was to Christianize the workplace to ensure industrial democracy through education.*

### Keywords

Catholic labor education, social encyclicals, Christianizing the workplace

The traditional Catholic approach to education flows from a foundational anthropology that is grounded in theology (Piederit & Morey, 2012). Communicating these values is at the core of Catholic education, particularly in the parish school system, in the United States (Burns, 1912). This methodology focuses on creating a vision that not only promotes an ideology but also affirms the principle of sacramentality. This Catholic vision considers God as present in all events, people, and movements.

From an historical perspective, Catholic education in America concentrated on parish schools, seminaries, and colleges. But, with the growth of

industry and organized labor, the need to expand the breadth of Catholic education increased. Worker education was gaining the attention of many in the secular and religious arenas. However, it took two papal social encyclicals, a world-wide economic depression, and American initiative to make worker education a reality.

In examining the historical narrative, we discover that Catholic labor education eventually evolved from indirect consequences. Initiated by the laity, Catholic labor schools were a strong collaborative effort of the laity and clergy well before Vatican II. However, the most important aspect of these schools was to train lay leaders to Christianize the workplace.

This work examines a neglected aspect of American Catholic education: the Catholic labor schools. This forgotten historical narrative of the labor schools presents examples of the curriculums and policies developed mutually by the laity and clergy to educate workers (both Catholic and non-Catholic) about their rights and duties, and how to apply Christian social teachings in the workplace. Legitimized by the social encyclicals and operated by the laity, the labor schools were to be a Catholic educational methodology to become a fundamental part of organized labor. Catholic labor education endeavored to build a Christian partnership of labor and management to ensure industrial democracy.

This curriculum was a different format of Catholic education in the United States, likely one of the first whose students were members of organized labor unions. Only when the American Catholic laity advanced the cause of labor education did this program succeed. The labor schools' success was marked by their longevity and adaptability to changing conditions in labor and management. These institutions were more than a continuation of the Catholic tradition of education as now applied to labor. The implication was that the laity ultimately shaped labor reform programs. Suggestions of the success of the Catholic labor schools were implied within Roosevelt's New Deal legislation, and particularly with the Wagner Act (Moloney, 2002).

Catholic labor schools constituted a bottom-up rather than a top-down response to social and labor reform. The social encyclicals became Vatican mandates for the laity to vociferously engage in the works of the Church. They were to participate fully as collaborators in the apostolate of social and labor reform (Alonso, 1961). The clergy could provide spiritual direction but the laity would complete the task of social reconstruction (Fitzsimons & McGuire, 1938; McGreevy, 2003). Pius XI's intent, with *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), then, was to illuminate the role of the laity in the work of the Church

and society, as certain aspects and disciplines were exclusive works to the laity—specifically, the transformation of the worker and working class through education.

### The Social Encyclicals and Labor Reform

As the Industrial Revolution advanced in the United States, the papal social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII, 1891) initially failed to affect the judgment and conduct of most legislators, corporate leaders, and many Catholic priests to pursue social and labor remediation. However American Catholic plans for social reconstruction and labor reform were instigated during the post–World War I period. America’s hierarchy, hoping to be more proactive in developing reform initiatives, proposed its own plan for social transformation in 1919 with the *Bishop’s Program for Social Reconstruction* (Dolan, 1985; Hennessey, 1983). But these concepts, radical for their time, did not fully materialize. Concerning social reform, Catholic clerical leadership was often weak and marked by internal discord (Cross, 1958; McGreevy, 2003).

In 1931 Pope Pius XI issued his own social encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, which reaffirmed workers’ rights, but this call for renewed social action did not generate overwhelming enthusiasm among many of the Catholic clergy (Gruenberg, 1991). An examination of this document revealed that it became the impetus for greater involvement by the laity in organized labor. The laity, through tangible accomplishments such as labor education and the formation of the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, became the true partners as leaders in the Church’s drive for labor reform. The most substantial aspect of labor reform, by the American Catholic Church, was actualized through education.

### Historical Initiatives for Educating the Worker

It was the considered belief among the poor and the working class that education enabled the less privileged to attain a better lifestyle and some manner of equality with the affluent (Podmore, 1924). Universal public education had become a prominent cause of the unions and their affiliated political parties throughout the nineteenth century. As a natural progression of their agenda, attempts to establish labor schools were not unusual for some of these groups (Dulles & Dubofsky, 1993).

Thomas Skidmore, a Connecticut machinist and teacher, who became the leading voice of the New York Workingman's Party, proposed a radical philosophy in his treatise *The Rights of Man to Property*. He asserted that every man was entitled to a guarantee from society that "reasonable toil shall enable him to live as comfortably as others." (Dulles & Dubofaky, 1993) Other social reformers, such as Frances Wright and Robert Owen, joined Skidmore in New York to promote universal free public education for workers as a means of moving them out of poverty. Ultimately, these ideals (and idealists) impacted labor movements on two continents.

Both Catholics and Protestants in the nineteenth century viewed labor education as foundational for maintenance of the moral order and as a transition to other types of social reform. Only through learning could individual union members comprehend the principles of a free labor movement and contribute to organized labor (Ward, 1956). Unfortunately, long-term religious efforts to train laborers about their rights and duties were unsuccessful. These programs originated from well-intentioned clergy who could not sustain the venture (Moloney, 2002). Two examples substantiate the failure of such efforts.

Presbyterian minister Charles Stelzle realized that an estrangement between religion and labor hampered both. To remedy this, in 1910, he instituted the Labor Temple in New York as a forum for religious, political, and social discussion (Chaffee, 1933). Eventually, the Temple expanded its agenda to include institutional, community, and adult education programs for workers with an emphasis on their spiritual welfare (Hopkins, 1967). The hallmark of the Labor Temple was its lecture series with a program of study that included history, anthropology, biology, economics, and subjects to "educate the workers for the additional responsibilities that will face them as a better social order comes" (Chaffee, 1933, p. 19). Factional disputes, philosophical differences, and attacks by conservatives eventually closed the Labor Temple and its school in the 1930s (Miller, 1977).

Catholics formulated their own projects to educate the laborer. An early Catholic attempt at worker education was in the early 1920s. Fr. Peter Dietz, a labor activist priest, organized a Catholic labor school in Cincinnati for the laity. His plan was to educate the laity to be professionals in the political and economic systems of the country and to equip them with Catholic social teachings to comprehend the spiritual implications of social service (O'Brien, 2005). The curriculum listed course work in religion and Catholic theology plus parliamentary law, public speaking, and the history, policies, and meth-

ods of the American labor movement. Considered by some to be a socialist program, the school never opened, and the priest was “requested” by Archbishop Henry Moeller to leave Cincinnati (Fox, 1953).

### Clergy, the Social Action Department, and Worker Education

According to labor priest George Higgins, the model of the Catholic Church in the pre-Vatican II age still reflected a hierarchical and paternalistic attitude: the clergy were the professionals, and the laity were amateurs (O’Brien, 2005). The National Catholic Welfare Conference, an organization of bishops and clergy, promoted the hierarchy as *the* qualified organization to speak for the American Church (Reese, 1992). Within this operation, the bishops also launched the Social Action Department (SAD), which functioned in many ways as a clearinghouse for Catholic social thought (Prentiss, 2008). But SAD was always clergy oriented and never intended for the laity.

SAD published a series of pamphlets, which represented “an effort to present to the general public, and especially to Catholics, a discussion of current economic facts, institutions, and proposals in the United States in their relation to Catholic social teaching” (Ryan, 1937, p. 1) based primarily on *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pius XI, 1931). However, SAD’s emphasis was to promote social reform education for the clergy only. In November 1936, SAD arranged “summer schools of social action study for the clergy” (McGowan, 1937, pp. 16-17). These summer programs consisted of “study clubs” (McGowan, 1939, p. 21) and discussion groups that examined topics such as economics, economic morality, communism, and social legislation.

Yet as the concepts of *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pius XI, 1931) were openly discussed in the middle of the Great Depression, there was an escalating agreement within the Catholic clergy that the papal message could best be advanced through social action and education among the workers themselves (Dolan, 1985). This signified tacit acceptance that the lay Catholic vocation was gradually being recognized as an equal, or nearly so, to that of the clergy. This program of lay involvement was vital in training lay leadership (Cronin, 1948). This adjustment of clerical attitudes subtly empowered the laity to be legitimate pastoral agents in society and the workplace, particularly in matters of education and training of workers. Realization of this change came in the late 1930s through the Catholic Worker Movement out of which eventually arose the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (Betten, 1976).



### **It Begins with Dorothy Day**

The most compelling individual leadership effort to uplift the worker originated with an American Catholic laywoman: Dorothy Day. A convert to Catholicism, she was a spiritual and social activist who focused on a range of issues—from management of social problems to directly tending to the needs of people. She particularly emphasized the dignity of the individual and the common good, which included the worker (Leckie, 1970; Zwick & Zwick, 2005).

Day experienced a profound spiritual awakening due in part to her personal mishaps and exposure to life in New York's underside. But her Catholic faith was not that of the conservative clergy or hierarchy. She committed herself to a life of simplicity in faithfulness to basic Christianity. Day applied those precepts to social problems that were profoundly formed by the social justice directives of Leo XIII and Pius XI. (Heineman, 1999) Her basic philosophy and lived theology was, fundamentally, concern for the individual and a reconstruction of the social order. She was not content to simply talk or read about social reform but worked as an activist for change (Thorn, Runkel & Mountin, 2001).

Day was attracted to the Church, as it acted on behalf of the poor, the immigrant, and the working class. She was scandalized by the clerical leadership, which often forgot to live out its own teachings. In spite of its failures, the Catholic Church, for her, was a consecrated community that she loved (O'Connor & King, 2001). Day wanted Catholics, not communists or capitalists, to lead and support the worker. She hoped for a radical revolutionary movement that was not atheistic but inspired by the teachings of the Church. This philosophy empowered her to form the Catholic Worker Movement (Vishnewski, 1980).

### **The Movement and Organized Labor**

The Catholic Worker Movement became that exceptional lay Catholic response to the conditions of that time based on the social encyclicals. The nonviolent Catholic Worker Movement was a way of life and philosophy. This produced the formation of the House of Hospitality in 1935, whose purpose was to shelter, feed, and clothe the unemployed and the working poor. Initially in lower Manhattan, other houses opened in Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and various cities. Catholic Worker farm communities were later started in rural Pennsylvania and New York (Troester,

1993). At the Catholic Worker houses, not only were the marginalized cared for but also discussion, debate, and activism were initiated.

Day's support for organized labor was often proactive and confrontational. She visited the sit-down strikers in 1937 at the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan, to encourage them (Troester, 1993). At strikes, Day's picket signs often quoted papal encyclicals (Zwick & Zwick, 2005). Her efforts to create better working conditions, unfortunately, were often misunderstood or misinterpreted especially at a time when labor's right to organize increased fears of communism or engendered anti-union sentiment (O'Brien, 1989). Day's interpretation of *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pius XI, 1931) guided her belief that the objectives of the Catholic Worker were to bring the social teachings of the Gospel and the Church to the worker through their newspaper, pamphlets, and by organizing study groups "for the clarification of thought." ("Day After Day," 1939, p. 4) Day considered worker education to be a primary charism of the Catholic Worker Movement.

The Catholic Worker movement was part of a new group of radicals searching for an American Catholic solution to daily problems and to build a truly Catholic culture, win converts, and lead to personalist social action that would revolutionize American society. The Catholic Worker Movement strove to be that particular organization. This movement's indirect stimulus on organized labor was that it awakened lay Catholics to social awareness and a call to change as promulgated in the social encyclicals. Its direct impact was that it birthed the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists.

### Formation of the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists

In 1936, Martin Wersing, president of the Utility Workers' Union of New York City, inadvertently read a discarded copy of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper on the subway. An article on the Christian labor program prompted Wersing to attend informal study sessions on the social encyclicals at Day's Catholic Worker House on Mott Street in New York (Oberle, 1941).

Part of the agenda of the *The Catholic Worker* was the Catholic Worker's School. This was not a formal educational program but a study group with various lectures ("The Catholic Workers' School," 1934, p. 4). Here, Wersing met Catholic labor activists John Cort, Edward Scully, and George Donahue. They considered the Catholic Worker Movement to be quixotic and not resilient in combating communism (Betten, 1976). Cort concluded that much labor violence and corruption emanated from apathy by Catholic union



members (Morris, 1998; Piehl, 1982; Troester, 1993). He resolved to start an organization that would teach Catholic workers about their rights and obligations as union men (Vishnewski, 1980).

Wersing and his friend Ed Squitieri were also acquaintances of a laborer who was fired for union activity and could not find another job. This man “finally went mad from despair and hung himself in the bathroom of a five-room tenement flat, leaving a sickly wife and five small children” (Cort, 1939, p. 34). Upset by this incident, Wersing reflected on how best to implement Christian principles on the labor front where Catholics can insert justice and human rights into organized labor and industry. Wersing, Cort, and Squitieri believed that educating the worker was the only true method to achieve this.

The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU) began without fanfare but with much passion. On Saturday afternoon February 27, 1937, a group of 12 Catholic union laymen gathered around a table in a smoke-filled kitchen at St. Joseph’s House to talk about creating a new labor group based on Christian principles. The group would be known as the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU).

Cort presided at the meeting as the union men expressed the need for an organization to teach Catholic workers their union rights and to combat the ever-growing influence of the communists. The purpose of the organization was not to be a “union within a union,” but to “educate, stimulate, and coordinate on a Christian basis the action of the Catholic workingmen and women in the American labor movement” (Cort, 1939, p. 34). Membership in the ACTU, according to the group’s tentative pact, was open to “all bona fide trade unions . . . whether A.F. of L., C.I.O. or otherwise.” (“New Association for Catholics,” 1937, p. 1) Nonunion members were eligible, provided they could obtain a union card (“New Association for Catholics,” 1937). Their purpose was defined as bringing Catholic working men and women knowledge of the social encyclicals. This would be accomplished by “(A) enrollment in this Association of all Catholic trade unionists; (B) promoting unionization among unorganized Catholic workers; and (C) applying Catholic doctrines to the problems of the trade union movement” (“C.A.T.U. Passes Constitution,” 1937, p. 6).

### **The Catholic Worker and ACTU Divide**

Minor tensions between the new group and the Catholic Worker Movement began to percolate within a few weeks. The response to the Association was so overwhelming that the shared office and classroom space was insuf-

ficient. The Catholic Worker Movement, from the outset, supplied funds and resources to the ACTU. But many in both organizations felt that the Association was likely to absorb and usurp the Catholic Worker Movement (Vishnewski, 1980).

The ACTU soon moved to its own separate space (Betten, 1976; Zwick & Zwick, 2005). Additionally, the group was *advised* that, as a lay organization, it was untrained in theological matters and could not speak as an authorized part of the Catholic Church (“ACTU Goes Forward,” 1937). Therefore, as a Catholic lay group, it required a spiritual director (Vishnewski, 1980; Ward, 1956). Fr. John P. Monaghan, a labor activist and friend of Day, was approached by the ACTU to be the organization’s chaplain and to act as a consultant in spiritual matters (Cort, 1977).

The inclusion of a chaplain did not compromise the ACTU as a lay organization. In fact, the appointment of a chaplain authenticated its Catholic spiritual character (O’Collins & Farrugia, 2000). The ACTU was a Catholic organization and was subject to the Catholic Church (Oberle, 1941). The ACTU’s primary functions were spiritual and educational. According to the ACTU’s Articles of Confederation, which cited *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pius XI, 1931), associations should “engage in imbuing and forming their members in the teaching of religion and morality so that they in turn may permeate the unions” (McLaughlin, 1957, p. 230). The teaching portion was conducted by the laity, as the ACTU was a “movement by and for the Catholic laity” (Oberle, 1941, p. 30).

### The New Deal, the ACTU, and Labor Education

The legislation of the New Deal era replaced labor alienation with institutional legitimacy. The ACTU endorsed most of Roosevelt’s “imperfect” programs but still believed that implementing the concepts of *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pius XI, 1931) was the better way to bring about economic recovery (Thorn, Runkel, & Mountin, 2001). Understanding the new government regulations regarding labor and industry at this time proved to be somewhat crude and confusing for the rank and file (Aronowitz, 1973). Additionally, friction developed between the AFL’s grudging acceptance of government involvement in the collective bargaining process and the CIO’s congenial acceptance of government’s regulatory role in labor-management negotiations (O’Brien, 2005).

These circumstances appeared ideally suited for the nascent ACTU. The Catholic labor schools established by the ACTU evolved to become the

ideal method for educating workers, Catholics and non-Catholics, about the Wagner Act and their rights as laborers and union members. At the opening of the labor school in Buffalo, New York, Bishop John Duffy urged all laborers to “learn the underlying principles and the Christian teaching relative to labor and industry[,] as the most pressing social need in America is a well informed workingman” (“Workers’ Schools,” 1939, p. 1).

### The Worker Schools

The ACTU considered itself to be primarily a religious movement. The spiritual tenet of the Actists was to be “ambassadors for Christ on the waterfront, in the union halls and picket lines, and in the court room” (“ACTU Celebrates Anniversary,” 1942, p. 4). Yet the most important activity of the ACTU, by its own admission, was education (*ACTU National Council Meeting Director’s Report*, 1941).

Cort and the other founders of the Association, inspired by the encyclicals and the work of Dorothy Day, claimed:

It is important that ACTU members remember that it is their ambition to save souls . . . of the labor movement . . . of our industrial society . . . of the individuals who make up that movement and that society. We are not a political movement but an educational and, above all, a religious movement. (Ward, 1956, pp. 100-101)

The goal was to be true *apostles* as the encyclicals advised, by introducing spiritual power, social justice, Christian principles, fraternity, and, ideally, the Mystical Body of Christ to the working man. Employing these actions, the lay Catholic social apostolate endeavored to reform the social and economic orders through education (*ACTU Catechism*, 1939).

The Actists, as they were often labeled, were equally adamant that the ACTU was not a separate labor union of only Catholics. The group declared that it was not a trade union and did not seek to usurp the “duties and prerogatives of the unions” (*ACTU Cleveland Convention Program Book*, 1941, p. 3). Instead, the ACTU’s mission was to “promote and foster trade unionism in America” as a necessary step in “building the new social order as called for in the Encyclicals” (*ACTU Cleveland Convention Program Book*, 1941, p. 4). The Actists’ intention was to work with organized labor and provide it with a moral code through education.

The ACTU's educational program was the worker's school. The executive council and many of the founders of the ACTU were college graduates who believed in the necessity of training future labor leaders (Vishnewski, 1980). Leadership was cognizant that the most effective type of learning came through personal contact, and the labor schools were devised for that very purpose (*ACTU Report of the National Council Meeting*, 1941). While membership in the ACTU was for Catholics only, the labor schools were open to all. A worker's school was established by the ACTU on November 8, 1937, "under the auspices of the ACTU and with the active assistance of Fordham University and the renowned Fr. John Boland, priest-chairman of the State Labor Relations Board" "New Association for Catholics," 1937, p. 3). The first classes would be conducted in midtown Manhattan and were free and open to *bona fide* trade unionists Catholic and non-Catholic, men and women (Vishnewski, 1980).

Father John Boland, a priest from Buffalo and the first chairman of the newly established New York State Labor Relations Board, was invited by the ACTU to plan a course of study for the labor school ("Labor Education Fights Corruption," 1942, p. 1; Collins, 1948). In outlining a program of study, he considered the types of courses necessary to educate the worker in both spiritual and temporal matters. Boland presupposed that the laity was insufficiently conversant with the subjects of industrial ethics and the theology of the social encyclicals. Accordingly, due to the merits of a theological education, he wanted the clergy to teach classes on industrial ethics and how to apply the social encyclicals to the work floor. These classes were to instruct workers in the "spirit of Catholic social teachings" (Oberle, 1941, p. 25).

The Wagner Act of 1935 sanctioned workers' rights "to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing and to engage in other concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid or protection" (Twomey, 2001, p. 43). However, Boland realized that the average laborer had negligible knowledge of the Act or how to exercise this new right against the illegal maneuverings of hostile employers or even union officials. He believed that lawyers were the best qualified to teach these subjects (Fortan, 1962).

Boland was keenly aware that ordinary working men and women, and even union leadership, did not possess the skills or, at times, the courage to speak out on behalf of their rights. The priest identified two particular courses that were vital to Catholic labor education and fundamental to the ACTU's educational program, and thus were included at every chapter: public speaking and parliamentary procedure.

Public speaking empowered the weak to speak. These classes required all students to participate as speaker, critic, chairman, or discussion leader (McLaughlin, 1940). Training workers to speak out for themselves at meetings assured that their voices were heard and not drowned out by the foes of organized labor (Fortan, 1962). Tribute to this came from Susan Bradley, who organized the Domestic Workers Union in Westchester County, New York. She testified that as a result of her studies at the labor school, she did not hesitate to address the New York AFL convention of 1,400 delegates to advocate for her local union (McLaughlin, 1940).

The class in parliamentary procedure was usually conducted by a labor lawyer (*A.C.T.U.*, 1937). The purpose of this course was to train union members in parliamentary procedures so they had the training to take the floor. This strategic maneuver was intended to thwart communists, racketeers, or corrupt leadership from denying the membership their rights and to strengthen workers in their efforts to improve their union (Ward, 1956). Additional courses included labor history and, eventually, economics. Over the years, the curriculum incorporated subjects such as accounting, union organizing, the right to strike, and collective bargaining (*Labor College—Diocese of Buffalo, Resume*, 1939).

The New York Actists started their first classes on November 15, 1937, on the eighth floor of the Woolworth Building in Manhattan. This was the site of Fordham University's city campus. The initial courses consisted of labor history, taught by Dr. Frank Downing of Fordham University's History Department; labor ethics training by Fr. John Monaghan, the chaplain of the ACTU; labor relations lessons conducted by Fr. John Boland; parliamentary law instruction by Bernard O'Connell, and public speaking lessons by Edward Scully—the last two of whom were labor lawyers ("Classes of Workers School," 1938).

The classes were fashioned to accentuate the concepts of the social encyclicals attuned to "practical information and trade union angles" (Letter of John Cort to Fr. Rice, October 12, 1938). The registration for the first year's sessions totaled 221 men and women. In all, 47 different unions were represented: 25 from the AFL, 14 from the CIO, and eight independent locals (Vishnewski, 1980).

The initial year of the New York labor school was deemed a success due to the significant number of enrolled students and the request for additional pertinent courses. Accordingly, the curriculum and venues expanded. For the second year of the school, sites at Manhattan College and St. Mark's parish

in Harlem were added. New courses also augmented the academic program. Dr. Friedrich Baerwald, professor of economics and a former member of the German Ministry of Labor taught economics. Classes in trade union practices—including collective bargaining—were conducted by William Treanor, a lawyer for the state labor relations board (“Pope Calls for Education,” 1938).

At the other sites, the classes were conducted primarily by laymen, although some clergy taught labor ethics. At the Manhattan College location, Norman McKenna, the associate editor of *The Labor Leader* and eventually a prominent member of the Detroit ACTU chapter, was an instructor of labor history. Labor attorney Edward Sheen lectured students in trade union practices. Courses at St. Mark’s parish in Harlem were taught by Harold Stevens, “a prominent Negro attorney” (Trade Union Practices) and William Harris, “well known in Negro educational circles” (Economics) (*News Release*, 1938).

The classes were open to all, with a nominal fee of 50 cents per course, although many unions offered their members scholarships. Courses were divided into two 10-week sessions and conducted as lectures and discussions in the evenings. After finishing a two-year program, members were awarded a certificate of completion. The faculty consisted of university professors, lawyers, and other professionals qualified to teach in a subject area. Many were Catholics and others were not—but this was not a prohibition to teach. Services by these experts, naturally, was gratis (Oberle, 1941).

The ACTU and its labor schools became known nationally though “word of mouth” and “prominent mention and favorable comment” in Catholic papers throughout the United States (“Labor Shorts,” 1938, p. 1). This attention generated a proliferation of lay-inspired labor schools around the country within a year or two of the inception of the New York school (“ACTU Chapters Spread Rapidly,” 1939).

But the ACTU’s education initiative varied from chapter to chapter and city to city as dictated by local distinctiveness. Even though Fr. Boland established a core curriculum, there was no national standardized syllabus or texts. John Cort, cofounder of the ACTU, for example, suggested to Pittsburgh’s labor priest, Fr. Charles Rice, that his best bet for worker education was to commence educational talks on labor ethics, labor history, labor relations and law, trade unionism, and industrial organizations (Cort, J., 1938, Cort to C. O. Rice, October 12, 1938).

In February 1939, Catholic union leaders assembled to form the San Francisco chapter. At the initial meeting, officers were elected and established a labor school to educate workers. Classes commenced immediately (*Report*



of the San Francisco Chapter #6, 1939). The basis of its curriculum was specific and local needs. For example, State Senator John P. Shelley conducted a class on labor legislation in California, which addressed that state's specific labor laws as applicable to both labor and management. Other courses included parliamentary law and public speaking. Additional lectures were titled *A Living Wage*, *Anti-Trust Laws*, and *Problems of the State Labor Commission* by H. C. Carrasco of the California Labor Commission, and other pertinent labor issues (*Report of the San Francisco Chapter #6, 1939*).

In Chicago, five labor schools were in operation; three were associated with local parishes. However, those schools were affiliated with the Archdiocese and not the ACTU ("The Inner Forum," 1938). Detroit, with an expansive industrial base, presented vast opportunities for Catholic labor education and thus produced an exceptionally active ACTU chapter. But worker education was under the direct sponsorship of the Church through the Archdiocesan Labor Institute, which maintained 41 schools. The Detroit ACTU sustained its presence in worker schools through the coordination of educational programs between the Archdiocese and the ACTU (McKenna, 1949; *National Director's Report to the Second Annual Convention, 1941*).

A layman in Milwaukee, John Oswald, was tenacious in his efforts to establish a labor school there, but his attempts were unproductive until the Holy Name Society intervened to form a labor school ("Holy Name Society," 2003). Approximately 50 men and women, Catholic and non-Catholic, attended a 10-week session on parliamentary procedure and a course on the Church and labor unions (*ACTU National Council Meeting, Director's Report, 1941*; "Priest Loud in Support," 1938).

Pittsburgh's labor schools—according to the national leadership of the ACTU—were viewed as being as successful as New York's, if not more so (*ACTU National Director's Report, 1941*; *ACTU National Council Meeting, Director's Report, 1941*). Four workers' school operated in the city and two others within the Diocese of Pittsburgh. While other chapters experienced fluctuating attendance, Pittsburgh's student enrollment increased (*Annals of the Pittsburgh ACTU, 1940*). The Bishop urged: "men and women, particularly union members, to attend sessions of the Catholic labor schools," ("Bishop Urges Use of School," 1941, p. 4) where they would learn about solid Christian principles and solutions to the problems confronting labor.

During the late 1930s and into the 1940s, diocesan-sponsored labor colleges appeared that were not directly affiliated with the ACTU but modeled after that program. The Detroit ACTU chapter operated its labor schools

through the diocese. The Cleveland chapter did not specifically form a distinct labor school; instead, it offered classes in labor organization and parliamentary law through the Institute of Social Education (Institute of Social Education, 1941). By the late 1940s, the ACTU claimed 26 worker schools: three in New York, four in Pittsburgh, two in Saginaw, 15 in Chicago, and one each in Milwaukee and San Francisco. However, the ACTU asserted that “one hundred schools of a similar nature” existed throughout the nation and followed the curriculum inspired by the “success of the ACTU schools” (*ACTU National Council Meeting, National Director’s Report*, 1941, p. 13). These schools organized in over 40 cities, such as Baltimore, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse, Hartford, Erie, Cincinnati, and Omaha. Some cities accommodated labor schools at several sites (*Labor College—Diocese of Buffalo enrollment and annual reports*, 1939-1975; Cronin, 1948).

### Jesuits and Labor Education

There was competition within the American Catholic Church to educate the worker in the 1930s. The Jesuits aspired to commence labor educational programs. In 1934, the Jesuits established the St. Joseph Labor School in Philadelphia, which was housed at St. Joseph’s Preparatory (Dennis Comey S.J. Institute of Industrial Relations, 1938-1942). In New York, they founded the Xavier Labor School and the Crown Heights Catholic Labor School, operated by Father William Smith, S. J. The Jesuits also attempted to organize labor schools wherever a Jesuit college or high school existed (Smith, 1949).

But this experiment did not achieve the desired results of the schools becoming permanent institutions. Although the Jesuits appeared to have started labor schools earlier than the laity, John Cort, cofounder of the ACTU, contended that the Jesuits started their schools *after* the ACTU began its. He argued that the Jesuit version was never viable and its program not truly based on the social encyclicals.

There were some possible reasons for the Jesuit schools’ lack of success. Father Philip Dobson, SJ, director of the Xavier school, was described as “very young and inexperienced and seemingly has poor advisors.” (Whelan to C. O. Rice, December 28, 1939) He and Fr. Smith created labor turmoil in late 1939 by attacking the CIO and the New York City transport workers local, describing them as the “breeding nest of American Communism” (Whelan to C. O. Rice, December 28, 1939). The rank and file of the transport workers union was angered at the priests over the distortion. These tactics eventually

hindered the influence of the Jesuit labor schools. The schools remained open for several years but most closed during the Second World War, as many potential students were serving in the military.

In Cleveland, the Jesuits at John Carroll University proceeded with their own labor school in 1945 to promote industrial peace rooted in Christian principles of the Constitution. Similar to the Cleveland diocesan program, courses at the university consisted of parliamentary procedure, oral and written expression, labor ethics, labor history, the labor encyclicals, labor legislation and a Christian philosophy of labor.

A pronounced difference between the programs was that the courses at John Carroll University were free, whereas the Diocese's Institute of Social Education charged a fee of two or four dollars per class. Enrollment at the university comprised unionized men from the various locals of plumbers, steel workers, autoworkers, carpenters, truck drivers, electrical workers, truck drivers, and other unions. Many companies represented at the Jesuit school were not present at the diocesan program, such as Colgate-Palmolive, Graphite Bronze, Standard Oil, White Motors, and others. But some, such as the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, East Ohio Gas, General Electric, and Republic Steel sent attendees to both schools.

There was a subtle but significant difference in the programs. The Jesuit school, while intended for the ordinary, sincere and earnest worker who sought an intelligent solution to employer-employee problems, also invited supervisors and managers to attend. The diocesan program focused exclusively on "blue collar" education. However, the moderate success of the local Jesuit program almost certainly persuaded the Institute to broaden its appeal to the entire work force of Cleveland. The Jesuit program was brief, lasting only a few years, yet its influence on the Institute's labor education program was appreciable into the 1950s and 1960s.

### **The Benefits of Catholic Labor Education**

Analysis of the Catholic labor schools indicates two evident components. First, even though the schools had to be canonically sponsored by the local diocese to be recognized as a legitimate Catholic organization, they were operated and staffed predominately by the laity. Lay teachers, expert in a specific field of study, conducted class. The exceptions were subjects taught by the clergy that required a doctrinal background, such as ethics or any lessons in religion and theology. The labor schools were explicitly an American lay Catholic enterprise customized for the laity.

Second, the central mission of the labor colleges was to educate and graduate lay students for leadership positions. These men and women were preparing for management roles not only in the union halls but also in the parish halls of the American Catholic Church. Utilization of the Catholic social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII, 1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pius XI, 1931), with formal education offered by the labor colleges, propelled America's laity into co-equals with the clergy in the development of the Church (Cronin, 1948). The labor colleges were an educational opportunity for a Catholic lay contribution to the life of the nation (Bresette, 1940).

### Secular Labor Education

The ACTU was not the only agent of worker education. Labor education in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s was an invaluable means for workers to achieve positions of leadership. Organized labor—both the AFL and CIO—established labor schools that could specifically address the needs of unionists and their problems (Hewlett, 1993). The most notable program was the Brookwood Labor School in the Hudson Valley town of Katonah, New York.

Brookwood's intention was to provide a technically trained leadership and an intelligent membership. Course offerings were in trade union organization; structure, government, and administration of trade unions; labor journalism; labor legislation and administration; the strategy of the labor movement; public speaking and training in speaking and writing. The curriculum represents a pragmatic approach to labor education but also equipped students to confront hostility toward organized labor at this time (Hewlett, 1993).

Other labor schools and colleges emerged during the depression (Altenbaugh, 1990). Commonwealth Labor College in rural Arkansas, described as a "Marxists [*sic*] institution," (Deverall, 1939, p. 9) operated for several years with a limited and unimpressive curriculum. Additional worker schools were primarily urban based such those in Portland, Denver, Seattle, Boston, and San Francisco, with the purpose "to prepare the individual worker, as well as the organization, for a share in the responsibilities of democratic control of industry" (Lembecke, 1984, p. 117). These labor schools closed within only a few years due to financial constraints, poor attendance, "courses of no practical value to the worker," (Bloom, 1979, p. 91) or indifference by some in organized labor toward worker education (Lembecke, 1984, p. 123).

## Misperceptions of the ACTU

The ACTU's mission—to Christianize the worker through action and education—experienced opposition throughout its existence mostly from communist-influenced unions (“The Program of the ACTU,” 1947). Its relationship with many in the Catholic Church was more misunderstanding among conservative Catholics who did not favor organized labor. The Association's purpose was not to be the doyen in the anticommunist or antifascist movement; its mission was the integration of the social encyclicals into American organized labor (The ACTU in Action, 1938).

Others misconstrued what the ACTU represented, and interpretations often depended upon the location of the chapter. Where negative views of organized labor were common, the ACTU was not received with enthusiasm. In Detroit and Pittsburgh—with higher concentrations of unionized workers—the ACTU was strong and realistic (Heineman, 1999). For some, the ACTU symbolized a pressure group; to others, it existed merely to assist with a work-related grievance. According to Earl Krock, the Cleveland chapter's president, many there viewed the Association as simply a “CIO propaganda organization” (*Minutes, Executive Committee Session*, 1941) that promoted their agenda.

## Catholic Misunderstandings

Some within the Catholic Church viewed the intentions of the ACTU cynically. Various clergy considered the ACTU to be a divisive force. Fr. John Cronin, noted for his work with organized labor and as the assistant director of the Social Action Department at the National Catholic Welfare Conference, was guarded in his overall judgment of the Association. He alleged that “bitter factional disputes based on religious issues can entangle the labor movement” and that “simple attendance at a labor school hardly seems to fulfill the Pope's desire for continuing religious instruction to the workers” (Cronin, 1948, p. 115).

Labor activist Msgr. George Higgins disapproved of the ACTU's “doctrinaire attitude” in handling labor problems. He contended that labor issues were not “as black and white as they were alleged to be,” (Higgins, 1944, p. 14) and regarded the ACTU as a special interest group to some degree. He argued that its actions created suspicions “even among very decent labor groups in some parts of the country” (p. 14).

Fr. William Smith, S.J., who conducted a Jesuit labor school in New York, criticized the ACTU's principle that workers have a duty to join a *bona fide*

trade union. Even though this idea was contained in the social encyclicals, Smith claimed that there were no pertinent theological justifications for it; however, he felt that a measure of credit was owed to the Actists for at least wanting “to do something about it” (Smith, 1939, p. 101).

Some of the hierarchy in the east who condemned New Deal programs and the CIO claimed that the Actists were causing some working-class parishioners to look unfavorably upon the Catholic Church (Heineman, 1999). It was working-class Catholics who saw economic recovery as possible through New Deal legislation; clergy who denounced these recovery efforts were not respected by those Catholics (McGreever, 1989; Piehl, 1982). The proper and most important legacy of the ACTU was the formation of labor schools to educate the laity and the worker. But, as the Catholic labor school concept proliferated, many dioceses established their own labor colleges, as they suspected that the ACTU was influenced by either the communists or a wing of the CIO (Corrin, 2002).

Father Monaghan, chaplain of New York’s ACTU, viewed the ACTU’s downturn from a religious perspective. He asserted that “unless the ACTU supplies a very definite need to Catholic men they will not join” (Corrin, 2002, p. 7). The priest felt that membership would increase when members were provided something tangible. Martin Wersing, a cofounder of the ACTU, endorsed this belief. He argued that the ACTU had to continue its efforts regardless of how unsuccessful it had been up to that time. The ACTU had to persist in educating and advocating for the working Catholic man and women; otherwise, workers would be guided by a variety of philosophies.

The educational program of the ACTU and Catholic labor education was successful. Graduates of these schools moved into more local—rather than national—positions of leadership within the unions and even government. Particularly in Buffalo, where some graduates of Catholic labor education became union officers, such as George Seibold or George Wessel, President of the Buffalo AFL-CIO Council. A future mayor of Buffalo, Stanley Markowski, and a mayor from Dunkirk, New York, Leonard Damian, were also graduates (*Labor College—Diocese of Buffalo enrollment and annual reports, 1939-1975*).

In addition to union officers, the Cleveland labor school claimed state representative Elizabeth Gorman and Thomas Clement of the National Conference of Christians and Jews as notable graduates (Diocese of Cleveland, 1950-1965).



### Mutual Defeat for Labor and the ACTU

The post–World War II decades of the 1940s and 1950s became a time of contradictions. Controls on labor were instituted in the form of the Taft-Hartley Act. The AFL claimed an increase in membership, and the CIO distanced itself from communist influence. Consequently, the unions merged (Taft, 1964; “The AFL Thrives,” 1952). The Catholic labor schools received valuable publicity that endorsed the adult education program, which produced “some tangible results” for both labor and management (“Catholic Labor Schools Open,” 1952, p. 605). Unfortunately Catholic labor education was no longer appreciated for what it could offer the worker.

There was also a shift in America’s direction. For the nation’s Catholics and others, the tensions between labor and management did not dissolve in the 1950s and 1960s; they were merely superseded by issues of civil rights or the Cold War (Carey, 2004; Dolan, 1985). Business unionism replaced the crusading spirit of the rank and file as a unionized work force continued to shrink (Cort, 2001; Nicholson, 2004). Better wages and living conditions assuaged any discomfort encountered by the working class as it ascended into the middle class.

Catholicism in the post–war years encountered an unprecedented growth and success not previously experienced. The overall national Catholic population increased, and returning Catholic war veterans were attending college in extraordinary numbers (Greeley, 1977; McAvoy, 1969). Additionally, America’s Catholics were now earning wages that positioned them in the middle class. They were now upwardly mobile economically, socially, and politically (Liu & Pallone, 1970). On the eve of the Second Vatican Council, America’s lay Catholics *had arrived*.

At this same moment, the ACTU began to fade away. By the late 1960s, due to a lack of national coordination and factionalism within the group, the ACTU disappeared (McGreever, 1989). Labor education, the hallmark of the ACTU, was now incorporated into secular college curricula. In 1945, Cornell University, in conjunction with the state and some assistance from the Catholic labor schools, instituted the School of Industrial and Labor Relations as a labor extension program (Day, 1950). Its program of study echoed that of the ACTU except for courses in theology. Similar secular college programs evolved throughout the nation.

The ACTU eventually vanished because the American Catholic Church, like the labor movement, had gone from working class to middle class (Cort,

2001). Interest in the social encyclicals and social justice waned in the economic surge of the post–World War II years, providing the illusion that all social ills had been remedied (Cronin, 1971). Social and union activism was relegated to a lower status.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the two remaining diocesan labor schools in the nation, located in Buffalo, New York, and Cleveland eventually closed. But the ACTU's educational programs remained, and do so, in some form or substance, to this day. The Catholic labor schools that had focused on blue-collar adult education were quietly absorbed into secular university curricula. They evolved into institutes of industrial relations, with emphasis on training labor and industry leaders as well as scholars who could conduct objective research in the field of labor relations (Gruenberg, 1991).

Father Monaghan, chaplain of the New York ACTU, complained in 1938 that “the Church had given labor too little leadership” (“Association of Catholic Trade Unionists,” 1938, p. 6). The mission of the ACTU was to provide training for Catholic lay leadership in organized labor. John Cort, cofounder of the ACTU, rightly argued that the Association suffered from some bad publicity and lack of support. Yet it was the ACTU's educational programs that became the motivator for the establishment of labor schools throughout the nation. The value was in the courses that trained “young trade unionists” and sustained idealism in the labor movement (Troester, 1993, p. 14).

Social reconstruction, via the encyclicals, did occur—although to a lesser degree than originally envisioned by the Popes. In the United States, the ACTU acceded to a position in the reconstruction effort. Initiated by the laity and centering on labor education, the application of the social encyclicals was a paradigm shift as it was a bottom-up rather than a top-down program.

Catholic labor schools, sponsored by either the ACTU or a local diocese, personified the social encyclicals that advanced beyond a parochial expression. That ultimate manifestation was a partnership between laity and clergy propelling America's Catholic laity into the forefront of leadership within organized labor to advocate for industry democracy through education.

The convergence of Catholic social doctrine with worker instruction moved the laity and the Church to the forefront of labor reform and social reconstruction. This lay apostolate established them as equals with the clergy and hierarchy. Yet it required the pronouncements of Vatican II to elucidate this principle. The labor schools were the American laity's unique response to the conditions of that day. The lay apostolate clearly demonstrated that the concept of equality did, indeed, have a place in the Church, and that for

American Catholics it was a component of Catholicism. The authentic implications of Catholic labor education in America were evident in the union halls, and now the church halls.

The Catholic laity's operation of labor schools qualified them to be a central operative in American labor and within the life of the Church. Unfortunately, in the 21st century as American labor is once again under attack and some of the Catholic hierarchy is weakening its support for organized labor, rudimentary instruction for the rank and file is no longer available especially when it is most needed. Teaching workers about their rights and Christianizing the workplace are beliefs conceived and practiced decades ago. Yet, those concepts are still current, relevant and required more today than ever to sustain the worker.

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