



7-2021

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### Recommended Citation

Lubienecki, PhD, P. (2021). Social Encyclicals and the Worker: The Evolution of Catholic Labor Schools in Pennsylvania. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 24 (1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.2401062021>

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*Journal of Catholic Education*

Spring 2021, Volume 24, Issue 1, 107-124

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<https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.2401062021>



## Social Encyclicals and the Worker: The Evolution of Catholic Labor Schools in Pennsylvania

Paul Lubienecki<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Many often identified the Catholic Church with the cause of labor and worker's rights in the United States. However that was not the common situation encountered by laborers throughout most of the nineteenth century. The proclamation of the social encyclicals: Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) elevated the status of the worker, endorsed worker associations and placed the Catholic Church as an advocate of worker's rights. But for the worker to clearly understand this change as well as his rights and duties education was vital. For workers in Pennsylvania, especially in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, the formation of Catholic labor schools was the catalysis for education and guidance in labor-management issues. Eventually their programs expanded to include anti-communist instruction.

This article examines the historical narrative of the Catholic labor schools in Pennsylvania and the curricula 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. These schools became a fundamental part of the labor movement where Catholic labor education endeavored to build a Christian partnership of labor and management to ensure industrial democracy.

**Keywords:** Labor Education, Pennsylvania, Anti-Communist, Industrial Democracy

Many often identified the Catholic Church with the cause of labor and worker's rights in the United States. However that was not the common situation encountered by laborers throughout most of the nineteenth century. It took the egregious working conditions in Europe to bring about change in America. The proclamation of the social encyclicals, specifically Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) elevated the status of the worker and placed the Catholic Church at the forefront as an advocate of worker's rights. For workers in Pennsylvania, especially in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Scranton, these changes came through Catholic labor schools.

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The traditional Catholic approach to education flowed from a foundational anthropology that was grounded in theology. This pedagogy was centered on principles that not only promoted an ideology but affirmed a sacramental aspect to education.<sup>1</sup> Historically, Catholic education in America concentrated on parish schools, seminaries and colleges. An acute need to educate workers about their rights and duties developed with the growth of industry and organized labor. At the fin de siècle worker education was gaining the attention of many in secular and religious arenas. But it took two papal social encyclicals, a worldwide economic depression and American initiative to make worker education a reality.

This article examines a forgotten aspect of formal education: the American Catholic labor schools in Pennsylvania. This historical narrative of the labor schools examines 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 both the clergy and 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. In Pennsylvania, the most prominent Catholic labor schools were located at opposite sides of the state in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.<sup>2</sup> This distance reflected a varied labor force and the development of distinct forms of worker schools.

### **Rerum Novarum and Labor**

During the closing decades of the nineteenth century the Industrial Revolution created universal social, economic and labor discord as life for the laborer was a deleterious existence. Although many in the Catholic hierarchy backed the industrial capitalists they recognized that the hazardous working environment and ensuing moral conditions demanded an improvement in the standard of living for the worker. Pope Leo XIII, with his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, acknowledged the plight of the workers and formulated a response to the burgeoning turmoil and as a retort to the social and labor crisis in Europe.

Within this context, Leo articulated what must be done to correct the current condition of labor: shorter working hours, days of rest, eradicate child labor, provide a living wage and the formation of worker's associations. The Pope demanded protection for laborers from the "brutality of those who make use of human beings as mere instruments for the unrestrained acquisition of wealth."<sup>3</sup> The intention was to counter the surge of socialism and dampen the rhetoric of Marx but in the United States its connotation took on an American accent.

For America's Catholics the document had profound and lasting implications in many areas. The most conspicuous positive application of *Rerum Novarum* in the United States concerned organized labor. Unions now believed that they achieved not just recognition by the Catholic Church but protection. Yet the American Church's reception of *Rerum Novarum* was more anomalous as uncompromising attitudes toward unions were still being transformed.<sup>4</sup>

The Encyclical was at first largely ignored by workers and employers. Economic affairs were part of the natural law and certainly not those of the Catholic Church.<sup>5</sup> Leo's document altered

the attitude of the world and how workers were understood. It was a source of encouragement for those clergy and laity who toiled to raise the awareness of the Church and the nation to the concerns of workers and the poor. But this process evolved slowly over the next several years in the United States.

### **Application of *Rerum Novarum* in Pennsylvania**

For Americans, the perception of the Encyclical's message was simple: the right for labor to organize and the call for a living wage. This added dignity and meaning to the laborers' toil. The ubiquitous experience of the industrial world was that workers must be held to the prevailing poverty wages of their employment contract. Many factory workers, miners and glass workers in western Pennsylvania, were paid according to the dictum of a "fair day's wage for a fair day's work." This wage formula favored the employer not the employee. Industrial capitalists paid labor less than was deserved because of the worker's ignorance, immobility, and lack of organization among other groups of workers.<sup>6</sup>

The predominant dilemma for workers throughout Pennsylvania centered on unions and wages. Strikes and lockouts were widespread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and often workers requested assistance from the clergy or their unions. But most laborers were apprehensive about union membership and Church support. A worker at a Homestead steel mill reflected the attitude of that time about union membership: "I had always a fear of joining them because I thought the Church was opposed to the organization and furthermore, from what I could make out of hearsay, I honestly did not like some of their ways of doing business."<sup>7</sup> Historically, the American Church tacitly backed the employer but now embarked to solidify her place with the worker.

The Encyclical's effect was how it activated change in the work place and in society. That change came in the form of workers and employers who agreed to establish industrial councils to promote better relations between them.<sup>8</sup> Attempts to organize industrial councils were instigated by the American Catholic laity in both the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh areas but never met with real success as they were either controlled by the company or viewed unfavorably by the worker. Labor laws in the Commonwealth continued to oppress workers in their ability to organize and these industrial councils intimidated workers who struggled to maintain their jobs.

### **Quadragesimo Anno**

Amid the throes of a worldwide economic depression and the spread of totalitarian regimes the fortieth anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* loomed. During those ensuing years the Catholic Church encountered profound changes in its expression of social principles and worker's rights. To commemorate this event, and to present his program for social reconstruction, Pope Pius XI issued a most activist encyclical: *Quadragesimo Anno*.

The genesis of the document originated from two conditions in Europe that affected the Pontiff: labor and the laity. In the intricacies of a fascist and materialist society, this encyclical was his answer to the labor turmoil infected by the worldwide Depression and a call to empower the laity.

Like *Rerum*, this new encyclical's intended audience was the Old World. Americans considered it from a different posture: their own.

Pius's encyclical was to reinvigorate *Rerum Novarum* and offered an alternative to the political and economic systems of that time.<sup>9</sup> Pius decreed that the Church had the authority to teach and speak about socio-economic matters because pontifical jurisdiction concerned itself "not only on the social order but on economic activities themselves." Economics and morality, for the Pope, were distinct but inextricably attached.<sup>10</sup>

Pius upheld that "labor was not a mere commodity" and that the "worker's human dignity must be recognized."<sup>11</sup> The encyclical decreed that worker associations, (unions) were vital in this matter: "People are quite free not only to found such associations, which are a matter of private order and private right, but also in respect to them freely to adopt the organization and the rules which they judge most appropriate to achieve their purpose."<sup>12</sup>

The implications of this particular paragraph were momentous for Americans. First, this was confirmation that the Church supported workers' in their struggle to unionize. Secondly, it was construed as the framework for the establishment of Catholic labor education that organized several years after the publication of the Encyclical. In Pennsylvania, savaged by the Depression, *Quadragesimo Anno* was initially judged as a Papal assessment of historical and cultural conditions peculiar to only certain nations in Europe. Concepts such as industry councils, a living wage, labor education and economic order were regarded as beyond the competence of the average prelate or priest.<sup>13</sup>

Socially minded Americans were pragmatic and selective of the document's content pertinent to their needs especially those that supported labor.<sup>14</sup> Most American Catholics simply regarded the document as permission for and validation of what American Catholic workers have instinctively permitted for themselves: their affiliation with non-religious (but not anti-religious) or neutral labor unions.<sup>15</sup>

At a time when organized labor endured the "lean years" and was branded as communist or anti-religious, *Quadragesimo Anno* for Catholic progressives, established a pro-labor attitude in the Church.<sup>16</sup> It proposed an alternative system for social and labor reforms. Gradually, the Encyclical embraced a wider assemblage of American Catholics and Americans in general.

Yet as the concepts of *Quadragesimo Anno* 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.<sup>17</sup>

This signified tacit acceptance that the lay Catholic vocation was gradually being recognized as an equal, or nearly so, to that of the clergy as the program of lay involvement was vital in the training of lay leadership.<sup>18</sup> With this adjustment of clerical attitudes the laity were empowered to be legitimate pastoral agents in society and the workplace, particularly in matters of education and the training of workers. The realization of this came in the late 1930s through the Catholic Worker Movement from which eventually arose the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists and formal worker education.<sup>19</sup>

### **Initiatives for Educating the Worker**

Historically, universal public education became a prominent cause of unions and their affiliated political parties so attempts to establish labor schools were not unusual in America.<sup>20</sup>

Both Catholics and Protestants considered 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.<sup>21</sup> Unfortunately, long term religious efforts to train laborers about their rights and duties were unsuccessful. These programs originated from well-intentioned clergy who ultimately could not sustain the venture.<sup>22</sup>

Only when the American Catholic laity advanced the cause of and were active participants in labor education did any similar programs succeed. Their success was marked by 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. There were profound implications as it was the laity that ultimately shaped these reform programs.<sup>23</sup> The clergy could provide spiritual direction but it was the laity that completed the task of social reconstruction through worker education.

### **Dorothy Day, the Catholic Worker Movement and the ACTU**

The most compelling individual leadership effort to uplift and educate the worker during this time originated with an American Catholic lay woman: Dorothy Day. A convert to Catholicism, she was both a spiritual and social activist who applied those precepts to social problem which were profoundly formed by the social justice directives of Leo XIII and Pius XI. Inspired by the teachings of the Church, Day formed the Catholic Worker Movement.<sup>24</sup>

The Catholic Worker Movement became an exceptional lay Catholic response to the conditions of that time based on the social encyclicals.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike most clergy, Day's support for organized labor was often proactive and confrontational. Day, and the Movement, reiterated that it was a natural right and duty for workers' to organize.<sup>27</sup> She summarized the objectives of the Catholic Worker movement as a means to bring the social teachings of the Gospel and the Church to the worker through the Catholic Worker newspaper, pamphlets and to organize study groups "for the clarification of thought."<sup>28</sup>

Part of the agenda of the Catholic Worker Movement was the Catholic Worker's School. This was not a formal educational program but a study group with various lectures.<sup>29</sup> From this was birthed the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU). The intention of the ACTU was that the local chapters made Catholics "conscious of the universal, all embracing nature of their religion and impressing them with the necessity of co-operation with non-Catholics in all legitimate action." The ACTU was not establishing dual unions or Catholic unions to compete with unions.<sup>30</sup> Its purpose was to educate workers about their rights and duties.



The ACTU supported Catholic union workers in their spiritual and practical experiences at the work place through education. The labor schools became the ideal method for educating workers, Catholics and non-Catholics, about the Wagner Act and their rights as laborers and union members. During its embryonic years, the ACTU occasionally sent members to assist with the creation of new chapters. It also assisted workers in their efforts to organize unions. But more often, ACTU chapters were established from labor strife.

The ACTU's position was that Catholics needed to work from the inside to protect worker interests and to raise the level of that union's policy closer to a Christian plane.<sup>31</sup> With ACTU members within organized labor, a Catholic labor perspective was available to debate the issues, review legislative proposals and consider the viability of political and union officials. This was accomplished through educational programs and labor schools.

### **Fr. Charles Rice and Pittsburgh's Catholic Radical Alliance**

The message of the Catholic Worker and the ACTU were enthusiastically heard within the Commonwealth during the years of the Great Depression. In Pittsburgh, Fathers Charles Rice, Carl Hensler and Msgr. George Barry O'Toole founded the Catholic Radical Alliance in 1937. The name was applicable as Msgr. O'Toole voiced that Catholic social doctrine was a truly radical doctrine.<sup>32</sup> The Alliance membership consisted of laity and clergy in support of labor who wanted to do something about the local social and economic mess. That "mess" was the Heinz strike of April 1937 and the right to organize.<sup>33</sup> Lay and clergy members marched with the strikers to remind laborers, and Catholics, that the Church supported unions.<sup>34</sup> Their charter emphatically stated that the Alliance was based upon the social encyclicals of Popes Leo XIII and Pius XI and "the direct inspiration that set us in motion was the Catholic Worker group directed by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in New York."<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, they defended the CIO and the Wagner Act against false assumptions by the clergy, particularly Fr. Charles Coughlin.<sup>36</sup> Fr. Rice, in his support of social justice issues, rebuked Communist, anti-New Deal Catholics and devious capitalists. He spoke out against Godless materialistic endeavors that harmed society but bolstered business. When challenged on the Church's authority to speak on such matters Rice replied that the Church has the right and duty to assert Herself in everything that affects the well-being of Her children.<sup>37</sup> Fr. Rice proclaimed that religion and reform were part of the catechism.

Many clergy and hierarchy, while supportive of laborers, mistakenly perceived the Catholic Worker Movement as too radical and the ACTU as closely allied with the CIO and Communists. Fr. Rice asserted that those concepts were "stretching the truth" as the CIO was not a Communist operation. Rice viewed the problem as Catholics watering down the social encyclicals so they could apply those parts in a convenient fashion.<sup>38</sup> The reality was that the ACTU attacked Communist insurgency in unions, especially the CIO, through educational programs.<sup>39</sup>

Pittsburgh's Bishop Hugh Boyle, a staunch anti-Communist and supporter of Fr. Rice, articulated his concerns that workers and the general public were misled by economic philosophies that opposed the fundamental rights of human dignity. He candidly declared that: "Unfortunately, the

efforts to solve the social question has been nullified sometimes by the subversive teachings of misguided agitators within the ranks of labor and a lack of understanding or appreciation of the problem on the part of the general public.” To counter this, the Bishop urged men and women, particularly union members, to attend sessions of the Catholic labor schools to learn about solid Christian principles and solutions to the problems confronting labor.<sup>40</sup> Consequently Pittsburgh became the epicenter of solid pro-labor and anti-Communist activity in the region.

### **Pittsburgh’s ACTU**

Fathers Rice and Hensler, in concert with Catholic lay men and women and with the approval of the Bishop Boyle, established the Pittsburgh chapter of the ACTU on August 30, 1938.<sup>41</sup> The membership roster spanned workers in both the AFL and the CIO inclusive of brewery workers, canning and pickle laborers, retail clerks and others.<sup>42</sup> By converting the Alliance to an ACTU chapter, Fr. Rice hoped to obtain the recognition and support of a national Catholic labor organization.<sup>43</sup>

The Pittsburgh labor schools, according to the national leadership of the ACTU, were viewed as successful as New York’s. The Pittsburgh ACTU chapter was cited as one that “stands out above the rest” and that every chapter should “follow its example.” The Pittsburgh unit was especially active in labor organizing, strike support, education and weekly labor articles in the diocesan newspaper the Pittsburgh Catholic.<sup>44</sup> This was likely due to the previous activities of the Catholic Radical Alliance and the persona of Fr. Charles Rice.<sup>45</sup>

Four workers’ school operated in the city and two others within the Diocese of Pittsburgh. While other national chapters experienced fluctuating attendance, Pittsburgh’s student enrollment increased.<sup>46</sup> The region’s large union membership, mostly Catholic, with the support of the bishop contributed to the success of the labor schools.

The Catholic labor school’s curriculum was straightforward and meant to educate workers about their faith, their rights and how to articulately defend their views. Preliminary courses were listed as: The Encyclical and Christian Principles in the Labor Movement; History of the Labor Movement; Parliamentary Procedure and Public Speaking. The course offerings mirrored those of the other ACTU chapters in the nation.

Fr. Rice, as the advocate of labor in western Pennsylvania, and the Pittsburgh ACTU did more than just educate Catholic and non-Catholic workers. The chapter set-up soup kitchens at strike sites and often provided food for the worker’s families. They also marched in picket lines and took an active part strikes for example at the Hubbard Company steel plant, Kaufmann Department stores and at the West Penn hospital among others.<sup>47</sup> Because of the achievements in Pittsburgh the ACTU held its 1941 national convention there with Bishop Boyle as its keynote speaker.<sup>48</sup>

The Second World War placed Pittsburgh’s and national Catholic labor education on hold as membership either served in the Armed Forces or worked in the defense industries. After the war and into the early part of the 1950s the ACTU and Catholic labor education fought for democratic principles within organized labor. Editorials in *The Labor Leader*, the ACTU’s national newspaper, denounced the lack of democracy in the Soviet Union hoping “that labor will never fall for the



hypocritical cry of the Communists.”<sup>49</sup> Pittsburgh’s Fr. Rice always believed that his ACTU chapter could offer active opposition to Communists in the labor movement. Throughout the 1950s he and the Pittsburgh chapter were assailed by the Teamsters in their attempts to eliminate Communist agitators from unions.<sup>50</sup>

But there was a shift in America’s direction. The tensions between labor and management did not dissolve in the 1950s and 1960s it was merely superseded by issues of civil rights or the Cold War. Business unionism replaced the crusading spirit of the rank and file as a unionized work force continued to shrink. Better wages and living conditions assuaged any discomfort that was encountered. Other issues dominated the labor landscape which assigned wages and work conditions to a lower priority.

During this time many chapters, according to the national leadership of the ACTU, were described as “moribund”; other chapters reported membership as “static.” In industrialized and unionized cities such as Pittsburgh, lack of consistent membership in the early 1950s failed to make the ACTU a mass movement.<sup>51</sup> Nationally the ACTU was “in the doldrums” and with the AFL-CIO merger in the mid-1950s national chapters disappeared.<sup>52</sup> As the middle class developed in the 1950s and 1960s and with the availability of labor programs at secular institutions the Pittsburgh labor school became obsolete and ceased operations.

Success in Pittsburgh was realized due to the efforts of Fr. Rice who, in a most activist manner, advanced the work of the ACTU in support of the laborer and worker education. This publicly and firmly affiliated the Church with the workers’ cause which validated that the Church was interested in the worker not only spiritually but materially. Although Catholic labor education concluded in western Pennsylvania the effects of a strong organized and educated labor force remain.

### **Philadelphia’s St. Joseph Labor School**

At the other side of the Commonwealth another Catholic labor school began that changed with the conditions of labor and management into a more permanent educational program. The Jesuits endeavored to open labor schools across the nation wherever a Jesuit college or high school existed.<sup>53</sup> Accordingly in Philadelphia, Fr. Richard McKeon, S.J. established the School of Social Sciences popularly known as the St. Joseph Labor School in 1935. Initially the school operated from St. Joseph’s Preparatory High School at 17<sup>th</sup> and Thompson Streets but relocated to St. Joseph’s College in 1937.<sup>54</sup> This evening school was available to men and women of all various skills and union affiliations.

The curriculum, like that at other Catholic labor schools, consisted of courses in public speaking, labor law, economics, history, religious studies and theology, literature and ethics. Classes were conducted by lay teachers but the majority of the courses were taught by Jesuit faculty from St. Joseph’s College. Enrollment from 1937 to the start of the Second World War averaged approximately 500 students for a fourteen week program. The Jesuits did not charge any tuition only an enrollment fee of \$2.00 per course to cover expenses for those who wanted “to get the right answers.”<sup>55</sup>

A review of the school's graduates over the decades lists a variety of occupations from skilled, unskilled to professional. While the majority of students were listed as laborer, machinist or metal worker job titles also included supervisor, manager, vice president and president. Employees of various positions from over a hundred companies and sixty-eight unions attended the Philadelphia Catholic labor school. Educational levels of the students ranged from high school to college and medical doctor. Analysis of the annual student roster revealed that approximately ninety percent were Catholics, eight percent non-Catholics and usually two percent registered as "no religion."<sup>56</sup>

Many clergy and hierarchy, while supportive of laborers, mistakenly perceived the Catholic Worker Movement as too radical and the ACTU as closely allied with the CIO and Communists. The reality was that the ACTU attacked Communist insurgency in unions, especially the CIO.<sup>57</sup> This was evident in Philadelphia where the school's curriculum melded religion and theology with economics and labor relations as a bulwark against Communist and Fascist infiltration of organized labor.

The school was advertised as the first anti-Communism school in America. Fr. Richard McKeon, S.J., dean of the school stated that their program was the answer to the challenges of Communism.<sup>58</sup> This was clearly evident in courses such as *Movements in Modern History*. The class addressed only two areas: the philosophical context and objectives of Marx, Lenin and Communism. Additionally the material included the other threat to America in the 1930s: Hitler, Mussolini and Nazism.<sup>59</sup> Students appreciated this stance. A graduate of the program wrote that he and his wife were not deterred driving thirty miles from their home to Philadelphia to attend class. The school "opened my eyes to the (Communist) menace...my wife and I have become apostles in the battle."<sup>60</sup>

Unfortunately with the looming threat of a second world war, a declining enrollment and a shortage of qualified lay and clergy teachers Fr. McKeon was forced to close the School of Social Sciences in the Spring of 1941. He was proud of the program's achievements in the first four years but depressed by its decline over the next three. The priest believed that this type of educational agenda was necessary to combat Communism in labor and industry. McKeon remained optimistic that another similar program would emerge but due to personal problems was unable to continue in a leadership role.<sup>61</sup>

### **Fr. Comey's Institute of Industrial Relations**

The Philadelphia Jesuits realized the value and significance of labor education in the Delaware Valley combatting Communists and corrupt labor leadership. In the Summer of 1943 Jesuit Provincial Fr. Vincent Keelan, S.J. assigned local labor priest and arbitrator Fr. Dennis Comey, S.J. to organize, plan and direct a new reconstituted labor school.<sup>62</sup> Comey was active with organized labor at the city's shipyards and docks since the mid-1930s. He rapidly earned great respect for his impartiality and clear vision in settling difficult labor issues. The priest's superiors viewed this experience with labor-management disputes as ideally suited for the appointment.

However, Fr. Comey was reluctant to start a labor school. Writing to the Provincial, Fr. Comey observed that labor schools were too negative in their curriculum about business and a more positive approach was required in labor education. The priest's perception was that the future of labor education must be all-encompassing and objective to sustain a labor school into the future.<sup>63</sup> With the support of his superiors for this type of education Fr. Comey founded the Institute of Industrial Relations at St. Joseph's College in Philadelphia. The school opened in January 1944 offering four courses taught by lay and clergy faculty attended by twenty-six male students.

His vision of this new school was to be wider in scope than any other Catholic labor school. Fr. Comey insisted that the hyphen in the term "labor-management" was the most important part as he believed that the curriculum should reflect both Jesuit academic pedagogy and be ruggedly practical for both employee and employer.<sup>64</sup> He stressed that one-sided education was not authentic education. This new school was to be distinct.

Additionally, Fr. Comey did not want this to be another labor studies program that subscribed to a business school agenda as found in secular educational institutions. The priest's goal was education with the mutual interaction of labor with management.<sup>65</sup> Through this technique he believed that reason, civility and ethics replaced anger, emotion and self-interest in labor disputes.

The Institute's program offered an alternative to laissez-faire capitalism but revealed a curriculum even more anti-Communist in scope than was offered at other Catholic labor colleges or at the ACTU schools.<sup>66</sup> Examination of the Institute's program offers some clue to this attraction. Fr. Comey ensured that the core curriculum was based on Church teachings first yet was pragmatic and applicable to the factory worker or business manager.

In the early years of the school courses reflected this methodology. The class on the *Philosophy of Unionism* was meant to teach the ethics of labor association, rights and duties of laborers and explain how the strike was an extension of free speech. This class was not to be an apologetic for labor or an endorsement of malpractice by labor.<sup>67</sup> Other listed courses were *Public Speaking, Religion in the Modern World and Social and Political Movements in American History*. Each class incorporated elements that reflected an anti-Communist American position.

As the school progressed into the Cold War era of the 1950s the curriculum was broadened to forty-five courses with an enrollment of over 250 men and women. Those additional courses now reflected a more business/management orientation. Classes titled *Human Resources Management, Employment and Labor Law, How to Conduct an Effective Meeting, Total Quality Management, Ethics and the Sociology of Work* while available to all students which emphasized management's role in the labor-management relationship.<sup>68</sup>

Some further insight for this modification can be gleaned from John O'Hara's activities as the Archbishop of Philadelphia (1951-1960). O'Hara zealously defended the rights of business over labor. An avowed anti-Communist he often was in conflict with the National Catholic Welfare Conference's support of labor.<sup>69</sup> He considered the concept of industrial councils, with the active participation of the government and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, as not relevant to papal teaching.

For the archbishop the ACTU and its programs for worker education may not be representative of honest labor since it supported “bona fide” labor unions which included the CIO.<sup>70</sup> Consequently he did not permit the establishment of an ACTU chapter within the Archdiocese. The prelate was not anti-union but felt that organized labor received better treatment from the Church than was deserved at that time and claimed labor in America had already achieved a high standard of living.<sup>71</sup> Yet O’Hara supported the work of Philadelphia Jesuit Fr. Dennis Comey and the Institute’s rigorous anti-Communist curriculum.

### **A Mutual Purpose**

The direction of the Institute shifted in the post-Vatican II era. In appreciation for the efforts of the school’s founder the name was changed to the *Comey Institute of Industrial Relations*. Courses reflected the conditions of that time with new classes in *Employee Ownership*, *Equity for Women* and *Global Economies in Africa*.<sup>72</sup> The more significant yet subtle aspect of the school remained as an unofficial forum for labor and management to discuss and rectify issues of mutual concern. As an arbitrator for the Port Authority of Philadelphia this was an appropriate arrangement for Fr. Comey.

Within this framework the concept of a labor-management “counseling service” became viable for settling labor disputes. Under the informal guidance of labor attorneys, union representatives, management and arbitrators the classroom of the Institute was more than a site for education, it was the setting for indirect labor-management conflict resolution. In this arena the labor school created an atmosphere of impartiality where everyone removed from the bargaining table could express their own viewpoint. The United Food and Commercial Workers Union and the local Teamsters Union benefited from such a procedure. However the International Longshoreman’s Association #1242 preferred to strike rather than arbitrate.<sup>73</sup>

In the late 1970s St. Joseph’s University moved the Institute from an autonomous entity to part of an interdisciplinary program of Industrial Relations within the School of Business Administration.<sup>74</sup> Fr. Comey’s legacy would remain and he asserted that the school should be neither pro-labor or pro-management but simple and practical. Other Catholic labor schools closed because they failed to adapt to the changing needs of labor and management. The Philadelphia program succeeded due to the vision of Fr. Comey by modifying the curriculum to the meet the challenges and requirements of industry, labor and a global economy.

### **Analysis**

There was a shift in America’s direction in the post war years. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 placed controls on labor. In the 1950s and 1960s America focused more the anxieties of the Cold War and less on the tensions between labor and management. More importantly America’s Catholics were now earning wages that moved them from the working class into the middle class. They were now upwardly mobile economically, socially and politically.<sup>75</sup> On the eve of the Second Vatican Council, America’s lay Catholics “had arrived.”

At this same moment the ACTU began to disappear.<sup>76</sup> With the challenges necessitated by the social encyclicals it was the labor educational programs that remained, in some form or substance, to this day. The labor schools, which concentrated on labor-management concerns, were quietly absorbed into many university curricula or became institutes of industrial relations. From this evolved training labor and industry leaders as well as scholars who could do objective research in the field of labor relations.<sup>77</sup> The social encyclicals were issued to promote the dignity and worth of the worker. While those documents were intended more for a European audience, Americans adapted them to fit their particular needs.

This was evident in Pennsylvania. In Pittsburgh, Fr. Rice advanced the work of the ACTU in support of the laborer and worker education. In Philadelphia the labor school evolved from an anti-communist/anti-fascist curriculum into a comprehensive college level program of labor and industrial relations.

Analysis of the two predominate labor schools in Pennsylvania indicate related components. First, the central mission of the labor colleges was to educate and train lay leaders. These men and women were prepared for leadership roles not only in the union halls but also in business and industry. For America's Catholics utilization of *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, and the formal education of the labor colleges in this process propelled America's laity to be participants with the clergy.<sup>78</sup> America's Catholic laity were no longer subalterns but peers.

Second, the Catholic labor colleges were designated as an educational imperative for a real Catholic contribution to the life of the nation.<sup>79</sup> It was a pragmatic labor training program to be utilized on the factory floor to bring about industrial democracy. These labor schools offered a positive solution in the eradication of Communist from organized labor to assist unions in maintaining their integrity. At the 1949 CIO convention significant discussions centered on the role of Catholics and their labor schools in this fight.<sup>80</sup> These institutions proved to be successful as Catholic labor education was proclaimed to be "the most constructive outside influence for the American labor movement."<sup>81</sup>

The Catholic Church celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* with Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus Annus* in 1991. The Pope reiterated *Rerum*'s message of reform in the labor movement as "the Gospel must not be considered a theory, but above all else a basis and a motivation for action."<sup>82</sup> But from the 1950s to the present Church support for labor has diminished and in most areas disappeared. Most dioceses had a designated labor priest who marched with strikers and was often the chaplain of the trade unions. Fr. Rice held that distinction in Pittsburgh and Fr. Comey did the same in Philadelphia.<sup>83</sup> Bishops such as Schrembs in Cleveland, Boyle in Pittsburgh and Quigley in Buffalo openly supported labor. Unfortunately as the membership in organized labor declined clergy support did also.

The Church's social teaching in support of the worker did not change but no longer was there a designated diocesan labor priest or the local bishop encouraging the efforts of organized labor. A Labor Day Mass and parade ultimately was the only official public display of support for organized labor.

In 2014 the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops wrote a letter to the United States Senate concerning economic and wage inequality. The document cited both Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem Exercens* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the dignity of work and that the Catholic Church teaches that "a just wage is the legitimate fruit of work."<sup>84</sup> Persistent issues in the labor struggle and a contemporary cause for organized labor. However, there was no further action by the hierarchy on this matter. Why this lack of Church backing?

Labor unions have been a part of most progressive social legislation in the past 100 years. Unfortunately there is a stigma attached to that. Some in the Church view social legislation with disdain. As organized labor has declined income inequality has grown. When labor unions are strong, workplaces are safe and when they are weak, workplaces become more dangerous but the Church no longer addresses these issues. The United States Catholic Conference of Bishops' 2019 annual Labor Day statement reminded Catholics that the Church has long taught that wage suppression and corporate monopolies are contrary to justice. It reminded Catholics of the priority of labor over capital. The statement repeated the Church's long-standing commitment to organized labor. Solid proof of this has disappeared as educational programs neglect to teach about the positive relationship between labor and the Church.

The purpose of the labor schools was to eliminate class distinctions and conflicts that pivoted on labor versus capital and engage labor and management to recognize their mutual dependency. The schools also taught Catholics about the precepts of their faith and the Church's support of social justice concerns. A business education informed by Catholic social teaching promoted a more realistic and useful understanding of business and its place in a good society.<sup>85</sup> These institutions proved to be successful in Pennsylvania because the Catholic labor schools encouraged values that were important in the operation of business and industry teaching respect for both employer and employee. Teaching workers about their rights and promoting industrial democracy are beliefs conceived and practiced decades ago yet those concepts are still current and relevant in the labor-management struggle.



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### Endnotes

- 1 Rev. J.A. Burns. *The Principles, Origins and Establishment of the Catholic School System in the United States*. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1912), 16-19.
- 2 Additional labor schools operated in Scranton by the Jesuits at the University of Scranton during the late 1940s-1950s; and briefly at Gannon University in Erie.
- 3 *Proclaiming Peace & Justice. Papal Documents from Rerum Novarum through Centesimus Annus*, Michael Walsh and Brian Davies, Eds., (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991) Rerum Novarum, paragraph 43.
- 4 Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Experience. An Interpretation of The History of American Catholicism*, (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1967), 221.
- 5 Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor. A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), 15.
- 6 Josiah Bartlett Lambert, "If the Workers Took a Nation:" *The Right to Strike and American Political Development*, (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2005), 25, 31-33 and Howard Patterson, *Social Aspects of Industry. A Survey of Labor Problems and Causes of Industrial Unrest*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1929), 160.
- 7 Morgan M. Sheedy, "The Encyclical and American Iron Workers and Coal Miners," *The Catholic World*, Vol. LIII, No. 318, September 1891, 855-856.
- 8 Sheedy, "The Encyclical and American Iron Workers and Coal Miners," 860.
- 9 Rupert J. Ederer, "Heinrich Pesch, Solidarity, and Social Encyclicals." *Review of Social Economy*, Vol. 49, No. 4, Winter 1991, 600-603.
- 10 *Proclaiming Peace & Justice. Papal Documents from Rerum Novarum through Centesimus Annus*, Michael Walsh and Brian Davies eds., (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991). *Quadragesimo Anno*, (QA) paragraph 41.
- 11 QA, paragraph 83.
- 12 QA, paragraph 87.
- 13 John F. Cronin, S.S., "Forty Years Later: Reflections and Reminiscences," *The American Ecclesiastical Review*, Vol. CLXIV, No. 5, May 1971, 317.
- 14 George G. Higgins and William Bole, *Organized Labor and the Church*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 22.
- 15 Henry J. Browne, "Catholicism in the United States," in James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison, eds., *The Shaping of American Religion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 99.
- 16 Higgins and Bole, *Organized Labor*, 21. See Irving Bernstein, *The Lean Years. A History of the American Worker 1920-1933*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1960).
- 17 Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, (Garden City: Double Day & Co., 1985), 407 & 415.
- 18 Labor priests such as Fr. Cronin consider the evolution of American lay leadership as a missionary work of the Church shared by the laity. See John Cronin, S.S., *Catholic Social Action*, (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1948), 37. Cronin, *Catholic Social Action*, 42-43. See also *Quadragesimo Anno*, paragraph 141.

- 19 Neil Betten, *Catholic Activism and the Industrial Worker*, (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1976), 72.
- 20 Foster Rhea Dulles and Melvin Dubofsky, *Labor in America, A History*, (Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1993), 33-39. Labor education existed in Europe also. In the 1850s, Christian socialists established the People's College in Sheffield, England and later the Working Men's College in London. See Torben Christensen, *Origin and History of Christian Socialism, 1848-54*, (Copenhagen: Universitetsforlaget I Aarhus, 1962), 337-351.
- 21 Richard J. Ward, "The Role of the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists in the Labor Movement," *Review of Social Economy*, Vol. 14, No. 2, September 1956, 81.
- 22 Deirdre M. Moloney, *American Catholic Lay Groups and Transatlantic Social Reform in the Progressive Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 10. Two examples substantiate this. 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 which never fully materialized. Presbyterian minister Charles Stelzle instituted the Labor Temple in 1910 which eventually expanded into the Labor Temple School to educate "the workers for the additional responsibilities that will face them as a better social order comes." The New York school lasted only a few years. See John Fitzsimons and Paul McGuire, *Restoring All Things. A Guide to Catholic Action*, (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1938), 204. This book was innovative at that time for encouraging more lay activity in the Church.
- 23 Moloney, *American Catholic Lay Groups*, 10.
- 24 Stanley Vishnewski, *Wings of Dawn*, (New York: The Catholic Worker, 1980), 37. Vishnewski's momentous memoir details his encounter with Day and enlisting in the Catholic Worker movement at the age of 18. He was an active witness and participant to the early years of the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists.
- 25 Eric Leif Davin, *Crucible of Freedom. Workers' Democracy in the Industrial Heartland, 1914-1960*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 92.
- 26 Rosalie Riegle Troester, *Voices from the Catholic Worker*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 4. Dorothy Day's pacifist position to W.W. II coupled with staffing and personnel issues devastated the Movement however it survives to this day.
- 27 *The Catholic Worker*, September 1937, 1.
- 28 *The Catholic Worker*, January 1939, 4 and *The Catholic Worker*, February 1939, 7.
- 29 *The Catholic Worker*, March, 1934, 1 & 4. A sampling of lecture titles includes: "A Discussion on Catholic Theology," or "The Thomistic Doctrine of the Common Good," or "American Government and Politics."
- 30 *The Catholic Worker*, April 1937, 6. Discussions on combating socialism, fascism and communism at the workplace occur later.
- 31 *The Catholic Worker*, July 1937, 4.
- 32 Catholic Radical Alliance charter. Archives Univeristy of Pittsburgh (AUP), Box 1, FF 42.
- 33 Fr. Rice's notations in Convention Notes from Cleveland, August 31, 1940. AUP, Box 1, FF, 43 and William Bolts, "Pittsburgh's Labor Priests in the 1930's," 20-23, AUP, Box 2, FF 32.

- 34 *The Catholic Worker*, July 1937, 7 and William Bolts, "Pittsburgh's Labor Priests in the 1930's," AUP, Box 2, FF 32.
- 35 Catholic Radical Alliance charter. AUP, Box 1, FF 42.
- 36 *The Catholic Worker*, August 1937, 3. Coughlin, a populist preacher, viewed the world as religiously right or wrong however, his radio sermons become exclusively political. Initially he was a supporter of Roosevelt, the New Deal and labor reform but, by 1936 he turned against FDR believing that the President never intended to enact the reforms proposed by Coughlin.
- 37 *Pittsburgh Catholic*, April 29, 1937 and May 13, 1937.
- 38 *Union and Echo*, May 5, 1938, 2.
- 39 *The Labor Leader*, February 6, 1939, 1 and *ACTU News*, Pittsburgh Chapter, June 25, 1941, 1.
- 40 "Bishop Urges Use of School for Workers," Pittsburgh Post Gazette, September 29, 1941.
- 41 Fathers Rice and Hensler attended a New York ACTU meeting in August 1937 where they were encouraged to found a chapter in Pittsburgh, *The Catholic Worker*, September 1937, 3.
- 42 Letter of Marie Connolly, secretary Pittsburgh ACTU chapter to Edward Squitieri, national president of the ACTU, August 3, 1939. AUP, Box 2, FF 1.
- 43 Bolts, "Pittsburgh's Labor Priests in the 1930's," 26-28, AUP, Box 2, FF 32.
- 44 ACTU National Director's Report, August 31, 1941, p. 5, AUP, Box 2, FF 6. ACTU National Council Meeting, Director's Report, May 30, 1941, 6, AUP, Box 2, FF 5.
- 45 Patrick J. McGreever, Rev. *Charles Owen Rice. Apostle of Contradiction*, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1989), 50.
- 46 *Annals of the Pittsburgh ACTU* (1940), 3, AUP Box 2, FF 7.
- 47 ACTU National Director's Report, August 31, 1941, 5, AUP, Box 2, FF 6.
- 48 *The Labor Leader*, August 29, 1941, 1.
- 49 *The Labor Leader*, February 28, 1938, 2.
- 50 Jay P. Corrin, *Catholic Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democracy*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) 288. McGreever, Rev. *Charles Owen Rice*, p. 94. See also Heineman, *A Catholic New Deal*, 151. Dan Tobin, international President of the Teamsters Union, ordered membership to "keep away from the ACTU no matter what your preachers might tell you."
- 51 Letter of John Cort to Fr. Rice, October 12, 1938. AUP, Box 2, FF 3; Cleveland Chapter Report to the National Council Meeting, May 30, 1941, p. 1. AUP, Box 2, FF 5; Minutes, Executive Committee Session, August 31, 1941, AUP, Box 2, FF 5.
- 52 *The Labor Leader*, January 31, 1952, p. 3 and *The Labor Leader*, December 1955, 2.
- 53 In 1934, the Jesuits established their first two workers' schools both in New York: Xavier Labor School and the Crown Heights Catholic Labor School operated by Father William Smith, SJ.
- 54 William J. Smith, SJ., "The Catholic Labor School," *Catholic Mind*, July 1949, Vol. 47, 394 and Archives, St. Joseph's College (ASJC), Folder- Fr. Dennis Comey, SJ. The Jesuits established their version of labor schools: Xavier Labor School, Manhattan; Crown Heights, Brooklyn; St. Peter's, Jersey City; St. Joseph's, Philadelphia and elsewhere. However, John Cort, co-founder of the ACTU, contended that the Jesuits started their schools after the ACTU began theirs.
- 55 Curriculum Report and Enrollment. ASJC, Box- School of Social Sciences, Folder-Worker's Schools.
- 56 Curriculum Report and Enrollment. ASJC, Box- School of Social Sciences, Folder-Worker's Schools.
- 57 *The Labor Leader*, February 6, 1939, p. 1 and *ACTU News*, Pittsburgh Chapter, June 25, 1941, 1.

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- 58 *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 9, 1936, 3.
- 59 Schedule of Courses, various years from 1936-1975. ASJC, Box- School of Social Sciences, Folder- Worker's Schools.
- 60 Letter of Lewis Golden to Fr. McKeon, SJ, Dean of the School of Social Sciences, April 2, 1936. Correspondence. ASJC, Box- School of Social Sciences, Folder # 4.
- 61 Letter of Fr. McKeon, S.J. to Fr. Love, S.J. Provincial. August 25, 1942. ASJC, Box- School of Social Sciences, Folder-Correspondence
- 62 Dennis Comey, S.J., "A Report on the St. Joseph's Institute on Industrial Relations." March 10, 1960, 1. ASJC, Box Comey Institute of Industrial Relations.
- 63 Dennis Comey, S.J., "A Report on the St. Joseph's Institute on Industrial Relations." March 10, 1960, 2. ASJC, Box Comey Institute of Industrial Relations.
- 64 ASJC, Box-Institute of Industrial Relations, Folder- Fr. Dennis Comey, SJ.
- 65 *The Catholic Standard and Times*, September 3, 1998, 10.
- 66 Schedule of Courses, various years from 1940-1975. ASJC, Box- School of Social Sciences, Folder- Worker's Schools.
- 67 Schedule of Courses, various years from 1940-1975. ASJC, Box- School of Social Sciences, Folder- Worker's Schools.
- 68 Schedule of Courses, various years from 1940-1975. ASJC, Box- School of Social Sciences, Folder- Worker's Schools.
- 69 James F. Connelly, ed. *The History of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia*, (Philadelphia: Archdiocese of Philadelphia, 1976), 428.
- 70 For further treatment see Paul Lubienecki, "Catholic Labor Education and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists. Instructing Workers to Christianize the Workplace," *Journal of Catholic Education*, Vol. 18, Issue 2, March 2015.
- 71 Connelly, ed. *The History of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia*, 435.
- 72 *The Catholic Standard and Times*, September 3, 1998, 10.
- 73 Dennis J. Comey, SJ. *The Waterfront Peacemaker*, (Philadelphia: St. Joseph's University Press, 1983), 2-7.
- 74 Meeting notes of the SCEP, March 21, 1977. ASJC, Box-Institute of Industrial Relations, Folder- Fr. Dennis Comey, SJ.
- 75 William T. Liu and Nathaniel J. Pallone, *Catholics/U.S.A. Perspectives on Social Change*. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1970), 50-67.
- 76 Interview of John Cort. Archives University of Notre Dame (AUND); McGeever, *Rev. Charles Owen Rice*, 153.
- 77 Gladys Gruenberg, "The American Jesuit Contribution to Social Action," 535. Similar programs are established nationally at colleges and universities such as Cleveland State University, Wayne State University, University of Wisconsin and other locations.
- 78 Cronin, *Catholic Social Action*, 42-43.
- 79 Linna E. Bresette, "Labor Schools Promote Catholic Social Teaching," *Catholic Action*, Vol. 22, March 1940, 8.
- 80 National Catholic Welfare Conference press release. January 3, 1949, 5.

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- 81 “What About Labor Schools? There is a Future for Them,” *The Labor Leader*, October 27, 1955, 2.
- 82 *Centesimus Annus*, United States Catholic Conference, (Washington, D.C., 1991), paragraph 52.
- 83 Similar labor priests were located in Buffalo with Msgr. Boland, Frs. Maxwell and Kulpinski; in Cleveland with Frs. Bartko and Krock. For fuller treatment see Cronin, *Catholic Social Action*, 229-235.
- 84 United State Catholic Conference of Bishops, January 8, 2014.
- 85 Charles Clark, “Bringing Realism to Management Education: Contributions from Catholic Social Thought,” *Review of Business*, Vol. 25, No. 4, Winter 2004, 9.

### Author Biography

**Paul Lubienecki** received his PhD in History from Case Western Reserve University focusing on the formation and evolution of the Catholic labor schools having published several articles on Catholic labor education. He is the Director of the Boland Center for the Study of Labor and Religion.