

Labor in the Pulpit
Rev. Kathleen Owens
Aug. 31, 2014

Holding down the grass, counting toes on a centipede's feet, supervising the work of the ants...this is the labor of children...this kind of labor is learning about the world, learning about themselves and learning how to day-dream, to imagine... and this is what the labor of children should be...and I hope for those in this room this is true...but of course, this has not always been the case...it certainly isn't the case for some children around the world today who labor in clothing factories and mines, and even in this country – not that long ago – we had children who worked in factories and shops. [if there are children in the room ask; if not ask how many have children in their lives under the age of 16] How many of you are under the age of 16 – Raise your hands. How many of you are 7 or 8 years old? Okay – if you lived in 1814 instead of 2014 – that's 200 years ago - if you lived then and were 7 or 8 years old – many of you would have a job...and you wouldn't be able to go to school, or play outside but you would work at your job for hours...in fact, you would work at your job for 50, 60, 70 hours a week! That's what many, many kids did 200 years ago...they worked in factories where they could work on big machines that didn't require an adult's strength; they worked in small places where adults couldn't fit into, and children were cheap labor – they didn't get paid as much as adults did...so owners of these factories wanted children to work...and some scholars say that in 1900 18% of all workers in our country were under the age of 16. Children would work between 12-18 hours a day, six days a week to earn one dollar. These children back then worked to help their families earn money to buy food, to pay the rent because their families were poor. “The English writer Charles Dickens helped publicize the evils of child labor with his novel *Oliver Twist*.” In 1832 various unions – made up of adults, because it was hard to have a union made up of children, adults in various

unions started calling for a stop to child labor. In “1832 The New England Association of Farmers, Mechanics and Other Workingmen resolve that “Children should not be allowed to labor in the factories from morning till night, without any time for healthy recreation and mental culture,” for it “endangers their . . . well-being and health” and the Women’s Trade Union League of New York in 1836 proposed state minimum age laws. . . in that same year the First state child labor law came into being in Massachusetts which required children under 15 working in factories to attend school at least 3 months/year”¹ It was unions, churches and other concerned citizens working together to demand laws to protect our children.

Now 200 years ago was a long time – and a lot has changed for many children now. . . federal laws say when a child or youth can work and when and for how long. . . except for children of migrant works – those folks who work in the fields planting and harvesting our fruits and vegetables. The law doesn’t say much about them and because of this, the working conditions are not always safe. And there are a lot of youth who are working now – many, many young people are working now, not to earn extra money but rather to help their families survive. “In March this year the Center on Policy Initiatives – with United Way of San Diego County studied what was happening to wages and working families in San Diego County. They found that 38% of San Diego’s non-elderly households don’t earn enough to cover a bare-bones budget for living independently in the area. Even among households headed by a full-time, year-round worker, 24% earned below the Self-Sufficiency Standard budget for their basic needs. The study also found that the tourism industry has the largest number of employees with incomes below

¹ http://www.continuetolearn.uiowa.edu/laborctr/child_labor/about/us_history.html; other information on this subject was found at <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/history-child-labor> and <http://www.history.com/topics/child-labor/print>

their families' basic needs – more than half of the 150,000 people employed in San Diego area hotels, restaurants and amusements[are in need].

To pay for basic expenses such as housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, and taxes without relying on public or private assistance, a single San Diegan needs an annual salary of about \$28,000, while two adults with an infant and preschooler need [more than double that amount]. The amount varies for many family types, but to be self-sufficient, all require much more than the current statewide minimum wage ...Hard-working San Diego families deal with that shortfall by doubling up on housing, relying on food stamps and other public programs, and by putting off or doing without things many others take for granted. Employees often go to work sick because they cannot afford to miss a day's pay, with consequences for their own health, their productivity and safety and health of others around them. The data demonstrate that the Great Recession continues for many San Diegans. The share of households living below the Self-Sufficiency Standard has grown from 30% in pre-recession 2007 to 38% in 2012, the most recent year for which all data are available. That's an increase of 71,472 households struggling to get by.² And once again, it has been unions, churches and concerned citizens organizing and trying to get the public's attention about the needs of working families. The San Diego City Council recently passed a minimum wage ordinance that will affect 172, 000 families in San Diego. This ordinance raises the minimum wage in stages and ensures all workers can earn 5 paid sick days a year. And yet there is a campaign to overturn this ordinance. You can find more information about how to be part of the Decline to Sign campaign and protect the minimum wage ordinance. We are joining our partners the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, the San Diego Organizing Project and the Raise Up San Diego Coalition. People of all faith backgrounds today

² http://www.onlinecpi.org/earned_sick_days_and_minimum_wage

in San Diego and across our nation are participating in and celebrating the benefits of labor. We do this work because our principles compel us into this action – principles that affirm everyone’s worth and dignity...principles of equity, justice and compassion, principles and sources that create a society that honors the democratic process and draws from forces that create and uphold life.

Like all institutions – as soon as a movement, whether it’s a labor movement or a faith movement, as soon as a movement becomes an institution one of it’s top priorities is to maintain itself...and in that process, yes, poor judgments can creep in, yes, some personal egos get in the way of work that benefits the whole but that isn’t ALL of what unions are or do...and they have a way of getting the attention of company owners and the public to shed light on working conditions that need to be examined. It seems to me that unions started out and try to ensure protection for the workers – with safer working conditions, wages that provide a livable wage; unions try to keep things fair...yes, owners and share-holders should make a profit...but that profit shouldn’t be so big that it keeps workers on the job when they are sick...and can’t afford life’s necessities...and CPI report talked about necessities being shelter, food, utilities, - not cable, not data packages on phones, not movies or vacations. One of labor unions’ core principles I think is protection against greed that would harm the greater good, the greater mass of people. The New England grocery chain Market Basket and the union that Market Basket’s workers belong to had a powerful victory this week and protected the job of its chief executive Arthur T Demoulas...the worker’s union protected the job of the CEO – how about that for a turn of events and here’s why as the story in the LA Times reported: the Demoulas family – which owns Market Basket – had a fight and ended up firing Mr. Arthur T – because it was claimed that he ignored the Board; Arthur T said the Board became greedy and wanted a big

share of the profits that Arthur T said should go to employees. he wanted to make sure the employees were being treated fairly...he was a “people person who knows everyone by name and makes personal connections with customers and employees...the story says Arthur T encourages employees to move up the corporate ladder and achieve their full potential...many who used to be bagging groceries as teenagers are now in the corporate office; When the Board fired Arthur T – the management staff, the workers and even truck drivers and suppliers boycotted the grocery chain – for six weeks – until Arthur T and his allies was able to buy a larger portion of the company and come back to work at the company – This is a story of the power of unions, and of the power of people who work together against greed and work for the larger good...Arthur T said to those who stood with him, You have demonstrated to the world that it is a person’s moral obligation and social responsibility to protect a culture which provides an honorable and a dignified place in which to work...You proved, all of you, that your grass-roots effort to save your company and harness thousands and thousands of people was about more fairness, justice and a solid moral compass that unites the human soul.” And this is what we are here to do as well...harness our power, and focus our work and support others in unions that are trying to protect and create a culture that provides an honorable and dignified place in which to work...we are called to be a moral compass for justice and fairness for all. Sometimes we think labor issues are not our issues...so we stay disconnected, stand apart and yet William Sloan Coffin’s words repeated in our centering thought say otherwise, “not to take sides is effectively to weigh in on the side of the stronger” ...and to stay disconnected, to think labor issues are not our issues is misguided – not only because we are all connected, but because our lives and sustenance are dependent upon others...and the work they do. So we choose to engage in issues of labor, we choose to celebrate workers and work for justice with them so all might

live more fairly on the planet. We do this work together when we let our light shine in a world that needs more light, more justice, more fairness – so please rise in body or spirit and join in singing our closing song – singing it to strengthen us to join with our brothers and sisters in the labor movement to bring more light and fairness to all who live and work in San Diego. Let's sing...