

Theological Reflection and Learning Circle Guide

Australia has a long and proud history of settling industrial disputes and promoting co-operation by its almost unique system of arbitration and conciliation. Over the years, this system has helped to defend the rights of workers and promote their well-being, while at the same time taking into account the needs and the future of the whole community.

John Paul II at a Sydney factory during his 1986 visit

The Social Action Office (SAO) has developed a Briefing Paper outlining the issues and concerns around the Howard Government's Industrial Relations changes. The information contained in the Briefing Paper serves as background information to this Theological Reflection and Learning Circle Guide and while it has been written from a perspective of Catholic Social Teaching we encourage people in ecumenical groups to find other information and to delve into their own faith traditions for the learning circle discussions and reflections.

Both Theological Reflection and Learning Circles as forms and traditions of 'popular' education encourage us to learn and to open ourselves to change through respectful dialogue and reflection and then to turn ourselves towards action.

This Guide offers a suggested process and questions around the key concerns and critical issues raised in the SAO Briefing Paper.

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1. Process for the Circles and Reflections

The following process is designed to unfold, either on one's own or as part of a concerned group, from an intellectual understanding of the issues through compassion into action:

- 1.1 As a first step, on your own, take time to read the SAO Briefing Paper: *Money over Humanity – Changes to Industrial Relations in Australia*.
- 1.2 Set time aside by yourself or with others and read the cameos. Read them slowly and aloud to get in touch with the feelings they may evoke. Then reflect and/or share your own stories or those of people you know.
- 1.3 Work with the Issues Questions that relate specifically to key issues in the Briefing Paper to gain a deeper understanding of the key issues.
- 1.4 Contemplate the Reflection Questions in light of the life-giving values of your tradition and culture.
- 1.5 Pray and/or ...
- 1.6 Get involved in the campaign in concrete ways – see the Action Page.

2. Cameos

Imagine you are 18 years old, a refugee from the Sudan who has only been in Australia for 12 months. You recently got your first job – cleaning a supermarket late in the evenings. Your level of English is still only quite basic and you think you are not really clever but you plan to keep studying and working as best you can to support the members of your family who don't yet have jobs. You expect life will now get better simply because you now have a job. You are told your pay is \$11.50 an hour but you find out that the supermarket chain no longer employs its own cleaners. Who is your employer? You learn the supermarkets contract out this work to another large company who now only employs subcontractors. So before you can start your job you must get an ABN and buy your own cleaning equipment. You're working now but the hours are erratic, the chemicals harsh. You fall ill and can't work for two weeks and once recovered you need to care for your mother and the baby of the family – they too have fallen ill. Your shifts are given to someone else. You find another cleaning job and it too is erratic and late at night. You discover that because you are an 'independent contractor' you have no rights to sick leave or regular hours of work or any of the other fair conditions people have told you about. A kind Catholic sister had helped you get the number from the Tax Office but you were shocked to hear that you must put money aside each week to pay tax. You are not earning enough to tide you over for the times you don't work – how are you supposed to organise this? Maybe you just hope you won't have to pay. Can this be right? Both the supermarket and the cleaning company can avoid providing the protections afforded to real 'employees'. They don't even have to work about the paperwork for the Tax Office. You become very stressed and confused and tired from working all night and looking after your baby sister all day. The TAFE English class teacher tells you the minimum wage is actually \$12.75 an hour – you are owed about \$400 but how can you fight the cleaning company? From despair to hope to despair again – you don't know how long you can do this no way out, no way out ... depression takes over and spirals down, down...

Imagine you are a Relationship Manager in one of the four big banks. Your job is to look after the accounts of the some of the Bank's 25,000 wealthiest customers. You are 43 with a husband and two kids and your salary is \$53,000. Your combined family income is \$96,000 but since you are the higher earner your entire salary goes to pay the mortgage. Things are tight, no breathing space in the family budget and you're worried about interest rate rises. The Bank announces to all the Relationship staff one day that you are all to

be moved across to a new subsidiary company. They present you and 99 other Managers with an AWA. Your salary has been cut by \$15,000. Sign it or there's no job. Your union gets involved and takes the Bank to court. You win but there is such bad feeling in the office now. You know that if you left this Bank it would be hard to find a similar job and you'd be faced yet again with another AWA. The stress and tension take its toll on your family life. It's only a matter of time before another "restructure". Will your marriage survive? What happens next time Chloe needs a new uniform and school books for high school?.....

Imagine you are a young person and have a mental disability. You are deemed fit to work for 15 hours a week by someone in your JobNetwork and so are moved to the Newstart allowance and told to look for work. All is good. You find 20 hours a week but then another psychotic episode sees you back in hospital and then back on the streets, breached by Centrelink with no income at all.....

3. Issues Questions

1. Scrapping of Unfair Dismissal laws for companies with less than 100 employees

In the absence of a fair process it is difficult to expect the development of constructive relationships between employers and workers based on mutual trust and loyalty.

Australian Catholic Commission for Employment Relations (ACCER),
letter to Kevin Andrews MP, Minister for Workplace Relations

Question

What kinds of workplaces and workplace relationships are likely to develop as a consequence of scrapping the Unfair Dismissal laws?

2. Proposed changes to wages and conditions

If through necessity or fear of a worse evil, the workman accepts harder conditions because an employer or contractor will give him no better, he is the victim of force and injustice.

Pope Leo XIII – *Rerum Novarum* #34, 1891

Questions

What does the group feel is a fair minimum wage for a worker supporting a family?

What social and economic conditions are needed to ensure a happy and secure family life engaged in the spirit of community?

3. The link between the proposed IR and 'Welfare to Work' changes

Question

What do these changes say about our society's level of compassion and our Government's agenda?

4. The Role of Unions in pursuing the Common Good

Although ... democratic societies today accept the principle of labour union rights, they are not always open to their exercise. The important role of union organisations must be admitted: their object is the representation of the various categories of workers, their lawful collaboration in the economic advance of society and the development of their sense of their responsibility for the realisation of the common good.

Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima Adventiens* #14, 1971

Questions

Thinking beyond the workplace, what are some possible negative effects and outcomes for individuals and the wider society if the collective voice of workers is silenced?
What has been the role of unions in our country in pursuing the Common Good and social Justice?
Does anyone have a story to share about this?

5. Independent, Secular Voices

Questions

Of the four critical labour market challenges facing Australia which will be positively assisted by the proposed changes?
Power over or power with: what kinds of government interventions would develop innovative partnerships in workplaces rather than places where one group has unbridled power over others?

6. Commentary

Questions

What is meant by the Common Good in the context of Catholic Social Teaching?
What values underpin the Howard Government's rhetoric and how do these sit with Catholic Social Teaching?

4. Reflection Questions

- How will the dignity of all human persons, but especially the poor and marginalised, be upheld by these proposed changes?
- How does a radically individualistic view of the world – one that paradoxically preferences corporations over the individual – serve the Common Good?
- Who is going to benefit from these 'reforms'?
- Who is going to lose?
- Who do you know personally who will lose out, in terms of finances or quality of life, from these 'reforms'?
- What is our own view on how to develop Common Wealth for the Common Good?

5. Prayer

**Make us leaven, Oh God of justice,
that believing in our own dignity and the dignity of others
we might help the world, with its systems and employers,
to develop in justice, love and respect for all
through just compensation, job security,
the right to organise and participate,
and adequate support for families.
Make us leaven that rises and gives hope.
Amen.**

6. Suggested Actions

See this webpage for more details: http://sao.criq.org.au/ir_campaign.html

PETITION to the Senate – both online and paper petitions can be signed. Sign, copy and distribute hard copies as widely as possible. **Return Date:** Send petitions back to the SAO by Thursday 17 November 2005. **Petitions – download at above site and link to online petition available there as well.**

POSTCARDS – Both hard copy and ONLINE are available.

Send a hard copy postcard to key Senators:

- **Joyce**
- **Nash**
- **Fielding**
- **and/or the Senator of your choice** (address blank on card).

Send an e-postcard to the above Senators – as well as to:

- your local Federal MP
- all your State's Senators
- The Minister for Workplace Relations, Hon Kevin Andrews at Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600.

Visit <http://www.aph.gov.au/whoswho/> for information regarding who to send your card to and their addresses. See the above SAO website for other details.

Contact SAO for multiple paper copies of the postcard.

BRIEFING PAPER – Distribute the SAO Briefing Paper to others in your networks – family, friends, workmates, etc. The Briefing Paper can be downloaded at the above SAO website.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION/LEARNING CIRCLE – Form a theological reflection or learning circle around the issues using the Briefing Paper as background material. Download from website or contact the SAO for copies of the Briefing Paper and Reflection/Learning Circle Guide.

LETTER WRITING – Write a letter to your local Federal MP. (Use the points made in postcard)

DAY OF ACTION – Make sure you join the next National Day of Community Protest on Tuesday 15 November 2005 – rallies and activities in your city/town and community – in support of the workers, the poor and marginalised, and a community life in our country. Go to http://www.actu.asn.au/work_rights/get_involved/ for more information.

NETWORK – Please let SAO know what you are doing so we can better coordinate, share and celebrate community in action together.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR – Write a letter to the Editor of your local newspaper – no matter where you are. It is important to get ideas circulating in many different parts of the country. Use the points made on the postcard in your letter.

PRAY – As always pray that the rights of all may be protected – especially those most disadvantaged. Pray for wisdom and insight for our political leaders. See the campaign prayer on page 5.

CONTACT the SAO Project Officer, Angela Ballard, Monday to Thursday at SAO on (07) 3891 5866 or email angela@sao.criq.org.au.