

Pro-union clergy voices enter Wisconsin debate

by [Nicole Neroulis](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue

The pro-union rallies in Wisconsin have a retro feel to them—particularly for people of faith. At one time clergy and faith-based groups were on the front lines of the American labor movement, but priorities shifted with the rise of the religious right and the weakening of unions.

In the Wisconsin protests over Governor Scott Walker's budget proposal that would reduce collective bargaining rights for teachers and other public-sector employees, however, religious voices have reentered the fray.

Groups like Faith in Public Life and Interfaith Worker Justice have mobilized coalitions that include Protestants and Muslims, in addition to Catholics and Jews, who dominated pro-union efforts in previous generations.

Clergy led invocations and prayer vigils throughout Wisconsin, wrote letters and sent delegations to meet with Republican lawmakers. An Illinois church and synagogue even offered sanctuary to the 14 Democratic state senators who fled the state on February 16 rather than vote on the governor's bill.

Walker says proposed legislation that would limit collective bargaining rights is necessary to close a \$137 million deficit in the state's budget, a political strategy that has since spread to statehouses in Indiana and Ohio. Union supporters have responded with massive protests.

The U.S.

Catholic bishops on February 24 threw their moral weight behind the pro-union protesters in Wisconsin, saying the rights of workers do not abate in difficult economic times.

"The debates over worker representation and collective bargaining are not simply matters of ideology or power," said Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, California, chairman of the U.S. bishops' committee on domestic justice, "but involve principles of justice, participation and how workers can have a voice in the workplace and economy."

Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, were both ardent supporters of unions and workers' associations, Blaire said.

Interfaith Worker Justice has compiled statements affirming the right to organize from more than a dozen denominations.

"We're making this a bigger issue than just the workers involved. We're making it a moral issue, and that it's more than just fighting over pensions," said Rabbi Renee Bauer, director of the Interfaith Coalition for Worker Justice of South Central Wisconsin. "We're hoping that if lawmakers hear from religious leaders, it'll help them have a change of heart."

While some conservative Christians have used biblical language to oppose labor demands, the traditional role of religion has been to support the rights of workers, said Thomas C. Kohler, a Boston College professor of labor law.

"Catholics and Jews have always taken the notion of work as being far more than instrumental," he said. "As the rabbis taught, God starts creation, but humans are given the gift of completing it. Work is a holy thing."

David L. Gregory, executive director of the Center for Labor and Employment Law at St. John's University,

agreed but said the blurring of lines between social and fiscal conservatives has eroded some religious support for unions.

"Anybody

identified with the Judeo-Christian tradition is making a commitment to [its] social justice dimension, but it depends on whether they're operating primarily according to their faith or according to politics," Gregory said. "Many evangelicals have increasingly been moving to the right side of the political spectrum."

The religion-labor bond

began to weaken during the Vietnam War and the civil rights conflicts of the 1960s, Kohler said. Among Catholics in particular, political efforts since then have focused on abortion and other "life issues," he said.

By the time Interfaith Worker Justice formed in 1996, the ties between religion and labor had all but unraveled, said Kim Bobo, the group's founder and executive director. But as the economic downturn has taken a toll on middle-class congregations, clergy have become more aware of the need to protect fair wages and benefits. Bobo said her Chicago-based group can mobilize those sentiments into action in Wisconsin and other states considering union-busting budget measures.

"This

attack is so vicious and so wrong that we're seeing people step forward to support workers, and it has galvanized people in the religious community," she said. "It's a huge resurgence." —RNS