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2. Which Side Are You On? Christianity and Labor in an Age of Inequality

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In describing the contours of our New Gilded Age, scholars tend to emphasize the big picture, marshaling statistics to underscore the historic nature of contemporary income and wealth disparities. These figures certainly have their place. It is eye-opening that [the top 1% of U.S. earners now command fully 21% of all income](#), numbers not seen since the years leading up to the Great Depression. And it is nothing short of astounding that, as of 2017, [“the wealthiest Americans--Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Warren Buffett--owned more wealth than the entire bottom half of the American population combined](#), a total of 160 million people or 63 million households.” But numbers, no matter how impressive, do not capture the changing texture of life on the ground.

Most people experience our age of inequality in far more intimate ways as they navigate rapidly evolving conditions in their neighborhoods, churches and schools. Consider recent trends in Valparaiso, Indiana, a small Midwestern city that some 35,000 people, myself included, call home. Class differentiation is anything but new in Valpo (as the locals call it), which sits some 50 miles southeast of downtown Chicago. It has long been home to a handful of business magnates, a sizeable professional middle class and a great variety of ordinary workers, as one can readily intuit from the built environment. The oldest neighborhood in town includes an eclectic mix of Victorian mansions, early-twentieth-century brick and frame multi-story homes and exceedingly modest mid-century cottages.

But in recent years, longstanding class divides have expanded into something approaching a chasm. A revitalized downtown, complete with an array of upscale local businesses – spas, boutiques, cafes, microbreweries, wine shops and even a meadery – has transformed Valpo into a fashionable bedroom community for Chicago executives willing to pay up to \$500,000 for luxury condominiums and townhomes, a price that would have been unimaginable even just ten or fifteen years ago. Meanwhile, nearly half of the town’s residents are struggling to pay their bills. [One 2018 study](#) found that fully

43% of Valpo's 12,335 households are not making the survival budget for this corner of Northwest Indiana: \$20,004 for an individual or \$59,544 for a family with two adults and two small children. Surging precarity is palpable across the community. One finds it lurking in school cafeterias, where [the number of children who qualify for free lunch has increased by nearly 50% in the last decade](#), as well as in church fellowship halls, a number of which double each night as shelters for dozens of homeless men seeking a safe and warm place to sleep.

It is no coincidence that inequality is on the rise in Valpo and across the nation even as the U.S. labor movement's epic decline continues apace. [Unions were a mighty leveling force](#) throughout their mid-twentieth century heyday, offering more than one-third of American workers – drawn heavily from the most economically disadvantaged households – a significant wage premium. But their power has waned dramatically in recent decades and here, again, Indiana offers a case in point. In 1964, [40.9% of Hoosier workers belonged to a union](#), a rate that outpaced that of Illinois and nearly matched that of Michigan, a longtime bastion of labor militancy. By 1989, that number had [plummeted all the way to 21%](#), and the freefall has continued unabated into the twenty-first century. [In 2012, Indiana joined the ranks of the "Right-to-Work" states](#) – now twenty-seven strong – and in 2017 alone its beleaguered unions lost 12.5% of their remaining members. As of last count, only 8.9% of Hoosier workers are unionized, despite the fact that [labor continues to deliver on payday](#). The state's non-union workers have a median weekly income of \$829, just \$.80 to the dollar of their unionized counterparts, who earn \$1,041 a week. Far from exceptional, such disparities in pay are suggestive of [the well-established inverse relationship between union density and income inequality](#). Little wonder that in Canada, where both private and public sector workers are [more than twice as likely to belong to a union](#) as their U.S. counterparts, [contemporary inequality is nowhere near as sharp](#).

Labor's current predicament springs from a variety of sources, but there is no question that one major factor has been the collapse of Christian support for unions. In the U.S. today, more than [seventy percent of the population affiliates with a Christian denomination](#), while only [six and one-half percent of private sector workers are unionized](#). One might attribute this vast discrepancy in part to apathy or even just to a gap in Christian formation. As someone who teaches the history of Christianity to undergraduates at a midwestern Lutheran university, I can testify to the fact that many of my students have never considered that their faith might have something to say about wages, for example. They often presume such matters to be dictated by "the market," a veritable force of nature that exists entirely beyond the purview of Christian social ethics. But the pervasiveness of such ideas is no accident. It speaks rather to the tremendous success of a generations-old effort to turn believers against unions.

In recent years, historians have recovered prodigious evidence of this campaign, which first [coalesced during the Great Depression](#), as corporate titans forged partnerships with mainline ministers who shared their distaste for the New Deal. The battle against the rising power of unions gained momentum at the grassroots in the 1940s and 1950s, when many white southerners – worried that the Congress of Industrial Organization's interracial organizing efforts threatened the heart of the Jim Crow order – joined the nascent National Association of Evangelicals in [working to thwart the ambitions of Operation Dixie](#). Meanwhile, Christian libertarians found in the Cold War confrontation with Communism an ideal backdrop for their mission to spread the gospel of free enterprise. Its power went [fully on display in Sam Walton's expanding Wal-Mart empire](#), built as it was on a foundation of hard-nosed labor and supply chain practices wrapped in a faith-and-family friendly brand.

By the 1980s, the anti-union movement had become fully ecumenical, incorporating not just evangelicals and mainliners, but also millions of white Catholics who had moved into the middle class, leaving the worlds of their parents and grandparents behind in more ways than one. Even as they fled rust belt cities for sunbelt suburbs, [so did they trade New Deal liberalism for colorblind meritocracy](#). In due course, such cascading developments yielded a sea change in moral intuitions, as Americans, having long seen inequality as a sin to be stamped out, came to see it as just another fact of life. Today, the distance between the pew and the picket line is so vast that anyone contemplating the relationship between Christianity and labor in the U.S. could hardly be blamed for lapsing into the old union song, “Which Side Are You On?”

But it need not be so. If history illumines how we got here, it also suggests alternative ways forward. Believers concerned about runaway inequality in the present will find in the past a rich vein of pro-union Christian thought and activism, one that extends back to the earliest days of the American labor movement. To be sure, it did not originate at denominational headquarters. In the late-nineteenth century, as now, church leaders most often looked askance at organized labor, which they construed as a threat to a divinely-ordained economic freedom: namely, the right of every man to negotiate an individual contract with a prospective employer regarding the value of his labor. In this way of seeing things, a union often appeared to be little more than a refuge for those scoundrels who refused to take responsibility for their own fortunes. As the Reverend David Swing – a path-breaking liberal in theology and biblical hermeneutics – declared in 1874, “The conflict between classes in the cities of our country is not a conflict between labor and capital, but between successful and unsuccessful lives.”ⁱ But by the early twentieth century a reversal was in the works, as clergymen across the country began to embrace unions. In the years ahead, any number of churches, both Protestant and Catholic, would become stalwart friends of labor.

The catalyst for these momentous shifts was the witness of countless working-class Christians, who in the immediate wake of the Civil War threw themselves headlong into a new battle over the gospel’s meaning for the industrial age. Consider the contributions of Andrew Cameron, longtime editor of the *Workingman’s Advocate*, one of the nation’s leading postbellum labor papers, and founding spirit of the National Labor Union, a forerunner of the American Federation of Labor. Cameron was a Scottish immigrant, an accomplished printer and an internationally recognized advocate for the eight-hour day. He was also a devout believer who used his many platforms to promote a resolutely egalitarian faith. In Cameron’s view, the trade union movement was not just compatible with Christianity. It was a fundamentally Christian response to the excesses of Gilded Age capitalism. As he argued in one editorial, “Poverty exists because those who sow do not reap; because the toiler does not receive a just and equitable proportion of the wealth which he produces.”ⁱⁱ Cameron supported women’s and African Americans’ inclusion in the labor movement. His life radiated the conviction that “the Gospel of Christ sustains us in our every demand...the volume of Divine inspiration is the rock of truth upon which our ‘pretensions’ are founded.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And he was hardly alone. Across the country, ordinary believers joined him in calling church leaders to return to Christ, who stood with the lowly. One wrote, “At present the workingman is rather repelled than otherwise by the grand church, the grand people who are there, and the grand rent marked on the empty pew he finds his way into.” Another put the point even more sharply, declaring, “[The church] is a sort of fashionable club where the rich are entertained and amused, and where most of the ministers are muzzled by their masters and dare not preach the gospel of the carpenter of

Nazareth.”^{iv} Workers’ message to the clergy was clear: “Have courage to apply the Sermon on the Mount to the social order of today.”^v

Such exhortations long fell on deaf ears, but when workers upped the ante, threatening to walk out of persistently anti-labor churches, they found new traction. Such drastic measures were never about their fidelity to the faith. As one labor editor pointed out, the real question was, “Have the working classes fallen away from the churches or have the churches fallen away from the working classes?”^{vi} The drama that unfolded in Chicagoland’s churches during the Pullman Strike and Boycott of 1894 seemed to support the latter interpretation. At that late date and even on the heels of several decades of industrial conflict, the nation’s Christian institutions largely maintained a hard-and-fast stand against unions. Workers were tired of it, as became clear that summer, when the battle between George Pullman and his workers ballooned into a national crisis. Before the dust settled, many working-class Catholics stopped their subscriptions to Chicago’s archdiocesan newspaper out of frustration with the editors’ refusal to side decisively with Eugene Debs’s American Railway Union (ARU).^{vii}

Such acts seemed mild when compared with what happened within the sanctuaries of Pullman town. In a Swedish Lutheran congregation, tempers flared when the priest denounced the ARU; when he refused to recant, working-class parishioners denounced him as a “scab minister.”^{viii} A similar backlash at the nearby First Christian Reformed Church prompted the pastor presiding there to back off his criticisms of the strike.^{ix} Nowhere was working-class resistance more concerted than at Pullman Presbyterian Church. When the minister there railed against the strike, working people left in droves. Notably, all but a handful immediately re-affiliated with other congregations in the vicinity, making clear that they were not abandoning the larger church but rather this particular one, which had become too closely identified with capital.^x

The pressure that working-class Christians brought to bear yielded a series of unprecedented breakthroughs. In the first decade of the twentieth century, nearly every major denomination issued [social statements endorsing trade unions](#). This opening toward labor was driven in part by rising fears that the churches were about to lose their foothold among the people, an outcome that would have had catastrophic implications for their sustainability, not to mention their cultural authority. But the social ethical paradigm shift was nevertheless profound and far-reaching. The nation’s churches had come, much belatedly, to hold that the demands of justice and the priority of human solidarity required some limits to economic freedom. This insight was woven deeply into the fabric of the New Deal and later the Great Society, and it infused the modern Civil Rights movement too. It was at the very heart of Martin Luther King’s public witness. He spent the last weeks of his life campaigning on behalf of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, who flocked to [his message](#) that “it is criminal to have people working on a full-time basis and a full-time job getting part-time income.” The intensity in King’s voice that day is all the more striking fifty years later, as one surveys a nation that is far more economically unequal than it was in 1968.

If we are ever to find our way out of this New Gilded Age, then we must attend to the insights gleaned from the last. It is not just unions that stand to benefit. Churches struggling to navigate a tidal wave of religious disaffiliation – strongest among young people, who are deeply concerned about their prospects in our increasingly inegalitarian society – may well find that any and all support lent to the labor movement redounds to their own revitalization as well. But the best reasons for rekindling the

friendship of church and labor have less to do with institutional preservation than with what is just and true.

Do not take my word for it. Listen to the voices of those working-class saints who have gone before us. If we have the ears to hear their keen moral arguments, we will find that they resonate still today.

ⁱ “The Labor Turmoil,” *Alliance* 1, no. 4 (January 3, 1874): 2.

ⁱⁱ “The ‘Advance’ Movement,” *Workingman’s Advocate*, 12 October 1867.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Liberal Christianity,” *Workingman’s Advocate*, 16 November 1867.

^{iv} H.G.C., “Views of a Mechanic’s Wife,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 March 1874; and H. Francis Perry, “The Workingman’s Alienation from the Church,” *American Journal of Sociology* 4, no. 5 (March 1899): 626.

^v Perry, 627.

^{vi} “Why are the Laboring Classes Leaving the Churches?” *Knights of Labor* 3, no. 4 (February 1, 1888): 4.

^{vii} “Debs on the Great Strike,” *New World* 3, no. 32 (April 13, 1895): 8.

^{viii} “Pastor Takes No Strikers’ Advice,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 25 July 1894.

^{ix} “Shy of Patrimonium,” *Chicago Record*, May 31, 1894.

^x See the “Registrar of Communicants,” archived at the Pullman Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL. For more on this story see also Heath W. Carter, “Scab Ministers, Striking Saints: Christianity and Class Conflict in 1894 Chicago,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 11, no. 3 (2010): 321-349.

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