




WORKER OWNERSHIP

A Way to Promote the Dignity of Work and Workers

BY DENNIS KALOB, PH.D.

For those of us who promote economic justice for all, there are many issues we can and do pursue. It may be time for us to elevate worker ownership to a top tier issue for which we fight.

Writing in his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (1891), Pope Leo XIII says,

Justice...demands that the interests of the working classes should be carefully watched over...so that they who contribute so largely to the advantage of the community may themselves share in the benefits which they create...It follows that whatever shall appear to prove conducive to the well-being of those who work should obtain favorable consideration.¹

Catholic social teaching eventually embraced, specifically, worker ownership. Pope John XXIII, writing in *Mater et Magistra* (1961), explains the issue at hand:

Experience suggests many ways in which the demands of justice can be satisfied. Not to mention other ways, it is especially desirable today that workers gradually come to share in the ownership of their company, by ways and in the manner that seem most suitable.²

Worker ownership is not only embraced by the Catholic Church, it has support across the political spectrum. Senator Bernie Sanders has strongly endorsed an expansion of worker ownership.³ And on the other side of the spectrum, President Ronald Reagan said this back in 1987: "I can't help but believe that in the future we'll see in the United States and throughout the Western World an increasing trend toward the next logical step: employee ownership. It's a path that benefits a free people."⁴

Employee ownership can take several forms, including:⁵

- Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs)
- Employee Ownership Trusts (EOTs)
- Worker Cooperatives

ESOPs provide workers shares of stock in the company as a retirement benefit, with no need for the workers to purchase any stock with their own funds. There are substantial tax benefits to both employees and companies for adopting ESOPs, and research indicates that these arrangements have positive impacts on both company performance and worker satisfaction and productivity.⁶ Today there are about 7000

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of them across the country, including Publix Supermarkets, Amsted Industries, and King Arthur Flour.⁷ Most ESOPs are created through the buying out of retiring business owners.⁸

ESOPs, however, do have some risks. If the company were to fail, employees could lose both their jobs and their retirement nest egg (in the form of the stocks they own).⁹ Another concern is that workers in an ESOP typically have little to no direct influence over day-to-day management.¹⁰ However, as stockholders, they have the ability to vote on major corporate decisions.

There are far fewer EOTs than there are ESOPs in this country, but in some respects their benefits to workers are more substantial. EOTs, also known as Perpetual Employee Trusts, are contrasted with ESOPs this way:

EOTs preserve the business over the long term for the benefit of the employees—not just their financial benefit, but also the preservation of their jobs and ownership. This contrasts to ESOPs, which, if faced with an acquisition offer, have a fiduciary responsibility to maximize the financial benefits to the shareholders.¹¹

Furthermore, the workers share the profits annually in an EOT. In an ESOP, worker-owners may receive dividends on the stocks that they own, but do not receive an annual distribution of the profits.¹² However, over 70 percent of workers in ESOPs report they have a separate cash profit sharing plan.¹³

EOTs do not have the significant tax advantages that ESOPs have, but there are lower set-up and administration costs.¹⁴

Finally, there are worker cooperatives, which may be what most people think of as real “worker-owned companies.” And indeed, this type of employee ownership is the most egalitarian and democratic. As Dr. Joseph Blasi, a leading scholar on worker-owned businesses explained to me in a recent interview:

Typically, they emerge as startups and use worker savings or philanthropic contributions as seed capital. Thus, they are often appropriate for less capital intensive industries, although increasingly they can be used to buy out retiring business owners with similar tax incentives as ESOPs.¹⁵

Worker cooperatives are owned and controlled by the workers themselves. Profits are shared and workers control the management of the enterprise. There are low set-up costs and some tax advantages. They are also more efficient and productive than conventional businesses. There are hundreds of worker cooperatives in the U.S. today, including Equal Exchange and Isthmus Engineering and Manufacturing.¹⁶

The most famous cooperatives in the world can be found in Mondragon, Spain. Begun in the 1950s in the Basque region of Spain, the Mondragon group is now a network of 96 separate self-governing cooperatives across the sectors of finance, industry, retail, and knowledge. They collectively employ more than 81,000 people and have operations in other parts of the world.¹⁷

Mondragon was started by Fr. José María Arizmendiarieta (also called Fr. Arizmendi for short). Gospel and Church values of egalitarianism, the promotion of the common good, and the dignity of work motivated Fr. Arizmendi and sustain this amazing project that represents for us a model of economic justice.

Fr. Arizmendi died in 1976. Shortly before his passing he seemed to sum up the project he birthed some two decades earlier in this way: “Hand in hand, of one mind, renewed, united in work, through work, in our small land we shall create a more human environment for everyone.”¹⁸

Worker-owned enterprises, particularly the most democratic ones, have demonstrated one way we can pursue economic justice. To be sure, these enterprises have had their difficulties, as all business ventures do within our rough capitalist world. They also are not a panacea for all our economic problems. They do provide us, however, with a viable roadmap to a society where the common good can be honored and pursued.

Six years ago, Pope Francis spoke before the Confederation of Italian Cooperatives. He told the gathering of their importance and value and urged the continued development and growth of the cooperative sector. Near the end of his talk, he shared these words, “We must have courage and imagination to build the right road to integrate, in the world, development, justice, and peace.”¹⁹

LEARN MORE ABOUT WORKER OWNERSHIP:

The Institute for the Study of Employee Ownership and Profit Sharing at Rutgers University

Project Equity

Most retiring business owners have great difficulty selling their businesses. Project Equity offers free consulting to owners considering converting their business to an Employee Ownership Trust or Worker Cooperative.

National Center for Employee Ownership

U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives

***The Citizen's Share*, a book by Blasi, Freeman, and Kruse.**

Author's Note: I would like to thank Dr. Joseph Blasi, Director of the Institute for the Study of Employee Ownership and Profit Sharing at Rutgers University, for inspiring and reviewing this article.

ENDNOTES

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Catholic Social Thought and Economic Security

Once again, in the wake of the economic devastation produced by the COVID-19 pandemic, we have watched our neighbors lose their jobs and their homes and have seen expanded soup kitchens, homeless populations, and bankruptcies. With these realities here and abroad, our faith calls us to respond with what the Catechism calls “a preferential love on the part of the Church” for those oppressed by poverty.¹ This response is rooted in the Old Testament love of the LORD for the *anawim* (widows, orphans, strangers, and the poor) and what Jesus teaches in Matthew’s Gospel about identifying Himself with the “least of our sisters and brothers” and that we shall be judged by our treatment of them (Mt 25:31-46).

The implications drawn out over two millennia of Catholic theology are immensely rich and should help us greatly in fashioning a wider and deeper economic security shaped by human dignity, the common good, and social justice. As the U.S. bishops put it, “*The first line of attack against poverty must be to build and sustain a healthy economy that provides employment opportunities at just wages for all adults who are able to work.*”² In this they highlight the tradition’s emphasis on a “family wage” going back at least to the first social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891.³ The Catechism explains, “Everyone should be able to draw from work the means of providing for his life and that of his family, and of serving the human community.”⁴

Related emphases in Catholic teaching over the past 130 years stress the importance of: (1) unions as a means to assure a fair wage, protect workers, and allow them to exercise their rights to participate in society and in the workplace; (2) employee benefits such as retirement funds, unemployment compensation, workers’ compensation, and so forth; (3) rights to emigrate to find work; (4) fighting workplace discrimination; (4) care for those unable to work due to age, disability, or care of children; and (5) the right to health care.

However, when widespread economic dislocation affects tens of millions of workers and their families, or even when a “normal” economy leaves millions unemployed or underemployed and unable to

support themselves or their families, “we the people” are called upon to provide a common good framework of economic security to allow all people to live dignified lives. This includes traditional systems of income support, nutrition, housing, and healthcare coverage for children, families, and even single adults. Such programs have been shown in this country to substantially reduce overall poverty and well-documented racial and ethnic inequities.⁵ However, they still have been grossly inadequate in past decades, acutely failing during the pandemic-induced economic dislocation. Our nation has been reluctant to improve and expand upon such programs to the extent that is needed.

Even more, our Church teaching has placed a special emphasis on society’s care for families and children, especially those children whose families are unable to provide a cushion of financial security and an environment that supports a child’s development and emotional maturity, enabling them to become, in that wonderful Church phrase, “artisans of their own destiny.”⁶

Underlying concern for economic security are three values. First is workers’ dignity in supporting themselves and their families. Second is enabling workers to contribute to the common good by their work, taxes, and other means. Third, according to Saint Pope John Paul II, is how our work makes us co-creators with the Divine Creator: “They can consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator’s work...”⁷

ENDNOTES

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OUR DIVIDED SOCIETY

Part I: Reasons for Our Current Crisis

BY CHRIS KELLERMAN, S.J.

In September 1950, the American Political Science Association (APSA) released a special report describing a major danger that they saw in the American political climate of the day: the political parties were not different enough. The authors of the report lamented that voters did not have clear choices between the two parties, that there was not enough party loyalty and national party leadership, and that the country might become too disengaged from American democracy if this was not fixed. The writers feared that this disengagement would lead to extremist views among American citizens.¹

It is hard to imagine anyone fretting over a lack of difference between the major parties today. As Ezra Klein remarked in his recent book on American polarization, *Why We're Polarized*, the APSA report in today's context sounds like a parody. But at the time, APSA's description of the two major U.S. parties was a valid one. The Democratic Party at the time was not thought to be liberal, nor was the Republican Party considered conservative. Politicians such as Thomas Dewey, Richard Nixon, and John F.

Kennedy expressed how terrible it would be if the parties had clear "liberal" or "conservative" platforms; and major candidates often had a mix of liberal and conservative views. Consider, for example, that President Nixon started the Environmental Protection Agency and was one of the most pro-Native American presidents of the 20th century, that President Ronald Reagan supported amnesty for undocumented immigrants, and that it was President Bill Clinton who declared "the era of big government is over."²

What happened?

Historical Reasons for the Divide

There is a story that, on the night President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, he told an aide, "I think we just delivered the South to the Republican Party for a long time to come." For decades, the South had largely aligned itself with the Democratic Party. But when Johnson chose to align himself with northern Democrats who were calling for action on civil rights, white southern Democrats saw his action

as betrayal. A greater proportion of Republicans in the Senate voted for the bill than Democrats did; but, crucially, Sen. Barry Goldwater—the Republican nominee for President in 1964—did not. This effectively drew a significant ideological line between the Democratic and Republican nominees. Slowly but surely, Johnson’s prediction proved to be correct: white southerners migrated to the Republican Party as the Democratic Party began to be known as the pro-civil rights party.³

Another major political alignment that helped solidify our current polarized state was the emergence of the Christian Coalition. From the late ‘80s onward, conservative Evangelicals increasingly began to align themselves with the Republican Party—helping the Republican Party to become the party opposed to abortion rights and in favor of what some members of this movement were calling “family values.” This also gave the impression of the Republican Party as being aligned with religious people, leading secular voters to align themselves more with the Democratic Party.

The critical result of these movements was not only that the parties developed distinct platforms. The parties also began to be sorted into groups of identities.

Identity Sorting

We know from polling that Democrats today are more likely to be non-white, secular, and urban, while Republicans are more likely to be white, Evangelical, and rural or suburban. These identities deal with more than just political positions—they deal with socialization and personal comfort. The parties can now claim to be “the place” for certain identities. To put it another way, as political scientist Lilliana Mason has written,

Due to the clearer distinction between the parties, Americans had far more simple cues to follow. These cues helped citizens to understand that a highly religious Christian who is also wealthy and white will feel most at home among Republicans. Similarly, a secular, less-wealthy, Black person will feel more comfortable surrounding herself with Democrats. The parties, by providing increasingly clear cues, have helped Americans to know which party is their own.⁴

This trend of the two parties becoming teams of sorted identities—what Mason calls “mega-identities”—is one of the main catalysts for our deep divisions and polarization. When a person feels their party is being attacked, they may very well sense their identity is being attacked—a sense that produces fear, panic, and anger. Think, for example, the intense hatred and even violence

that can occur from sports rivalries. When my team loses or is insulted, I may feel like I’ve lost or been insulted somehow as well.

Now imagine the same scenario applied to politics—a realm with much higher stakes than sports. If my political party gets attacked, I may feel like my very way of life is being attacked. And that will only lead me to seek more security identifying ever more closely with my political “team,” even if that entails defending my team at the expense of rational thought. Researchers such as Dan Kahan have called this phenomenon “identity-protective cognition.”⁵ We end up reasoning and rationalizing with our “teams” because it helps us feel safe, even if that means we have to believe something that is demonstrably false. It hurts too much to open myself to believing something different, so I dig my feet into the ground even more.

Rational arguments produced from the other side, then, do not help me to change—especially when those arguments feel combative.

Conclusion

Our country is certainly in a different place than 1950 when political scientists declared that the parties were too similar and did not have enough party loyalty. Today, many Americans feel the opposing party is not simply an opponent, but an enemy who threatens their way of life and who they are. A 2017 survey done by Mason showed that 40% of Americans believe the opposing party is *evil*.⁶

In the next issue of *JustSouth Quarterly*, I will present some possible solutions to our current crisis.

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IMMIGRATION REFORM AT LAST?

Five Immigrants Share Their Struggles, Hopes, and Dreams

BY SUE WEISHAR, PH.D.

Just hours after his inauguration, President Biden sent a comprehensive immigration reform bill to Congress that re-imagines a broken immigration system that has torn apart hundreds of thousands of families and fails to serve the needs of our economy. One of the bill's most important provisions creates a clear process for the almost 11 million undocumented immigrants living and working in the U.S. today to legalize their status and eventually earn citizenship.¹

I asked five friends, all undocumented immigrants from Central America and Mexico, their thoughts on the proposed legislation, life in the U.S., and what would change if they were finally freed of the burden of living undocumented. I share their responses below.²

PLANS IF ABLE TO LEGALIZE STATUS

Like two-thirds of undocumented immigrants living in the U.S.³ today, all five of my interviewees have lived in the U.S. for more than ten years and have deep roots here. Oscar came to the U.S. 17 years ago, married an undocumented woman, and together they are raising their two U.S. born sons, ages eight and nine. Born into extreme poverty in Honduras, Oscar had to start working to support his family when he was six years-

old. He was 14 before he owned a pair of shoes. In the U.S. he learned to read and write, speak English, and has worked for many years as a roofer. His wife started a small cleaning business, and they are in the process of buying a house. Oscar did not hesitate when asked what he will do first if he is able to legalize his status. "I will RUN to Honduras to see my mom. I miss my mom—maybe she will die. It is very hard... I dream every day for my papers."

Sonia, a 59-year-old grandmother to four U.S. citizen children, came to New Orleans from Honduras after Hurricane Katrina to rejoin her husband who was working alongside tens of thousands of other immigrant workers in rebuilding the region.⁴ Like Oscar, the first thing Sonia would do after legalizing her status is visit her mother.

Carlos is a star student in the ESL program I co-direct at a Mid-City New Orleans Catholic church. He has not seen his parents in over 12 years. Carlos would also immediately visit his parents who live in Oaxaca. 38 years old and single, Carlos calls his parents four times a week. Because he finds seeing them via a computer screen "too emotional," he prefers phone conversations.

Ana and Marta are fortunate that their mothers were able to obtain tourist visas in recent years to visit their daughters. Marta, a 42-year-old wife and mother from Central America, is fully bilingual and often interprets for Latino families. She would return to school and become certified to teach special education. Ana, who came to the U.S. from Honduras 15 years ago when she was 21 years old, will apply for a driver's license as soon as she has "papers." A vivacious young woman with a love of fashion, Ana would then get the training she needs to open a beauty salon. Oscar and Carlos would also like to open their own businesses—a roofing company and a restaurant, respectively.⁵

VIEWS ON LIFE IN THE U.S.

Honduras has one of the highest murder rates in the world.⁶ When asked what they liked best about the U.S., my three friends from Honduras emphasized how much they appreciate the safety and security they feel here. Sonia said, "In Honduras I went to bed afraid and would wake up every morning afraid." Her only son was killed by someone intent on stealing the shoes he was wearing. Ana's niece was beheaded by gang members. A man tried to rob and kill Oscar and in the process cut Oscar's hand with a machete.

I asked my friends what they liked least about life in the U.S., and Oscar could think of nothing because he loves "everything" about life here. He explained, "If you work—you live good. You make good money. Every day is a blessing for me. Life is so hard in Honduras." The other four interviewees said what they liked least about the U.S. was the racism they often experienced in their everyday lives from both white and Black Americans. While working in housekeeping in a hotel, Ana was pushed and shoved by coworkers. Sonia said she could not remember all the times she has experienced racism in the U.S., but one vivid example occurred at a small Mid-City grocery store when an American exclaimed, "What are all the wetbacks doing here?" Marta feels that during the Trump administration Americans "got permission" to speak negatively about Latinos. She was bewildered recently when two American women criticized her for speaking Spanish while she was interpreting for a friend.

THOUGHTS ON POSSIBILITY THAT CITIZENSHIP BILL WILL PASS

News about the U.S. Citizenship Act has been covered widely in Spanish language media. My friends' thoughts on the chances of the Biden Administration passing a law that would legalize their status and lead to citizenship varied wildly. Sonia thought there was an 80 percent probability, while Carlos gave it a five percent chance. Marta, who has been a vocal advocate for immigrants in her community for many years, was deeply pessimistic. She said there was "[Z]ero chance of [The U.S. Citizenship Act] passing... The country is too polarized... Look at what happened to the Republicans who voted to convict Trump... This is just showboating."

Marta believes, given the hyper-partisan nature of U.S. politics today, that supporters of the bill are expecting too much by

including a path to citizenship. She implored, "I have seen so many families devastated. I cry about it all the time... We just want a work permit... People just want a break... We are like birds with our wings clipped."

CONCLUSION

Despite the backlash that seven Republican senators, including Louisiana's Bill Cassidy, received from their party's leaders for their vote to convict former President Trump, many Americans were heartened by those senators' integrity and courage. Whether Congress is able to come together to pass immigration reform, which large majorities of voters in both parties support,⁷ will be a major test of our political system's ability to serve the common good. Passage also would be a strong affirmation of the kind of politics envisioned by Pope Francis: politics as "a lofty vocation, and one of the highest forms for charity," grounded in fraternity, solidarity, and relentless commitment to protecting the dignity of each human person.⁸

ENDNOTES


- 1 The U.S. Citizenship Act will allow Dreamers, TPS holders, and some farmworkers to apply for legal permanent residence (i.e. "green cards") immediately and for citizenship after three years. All other undocumented immigrants in the U.S. as of January 1, 2021, who pass background checks and come up-to-date on taxes can apply for temporary legal status that will last for five years and includes work authorization. Applicants could then apply for legal permanent residence. After a three year wait, one can then apply for citizenship. See White House. (2021, January 20). *FACT SHEET: President Biden Sends Immigration Bill to Congress as Part of His Commitment to Modernize our Immigration System*, at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/01/20/fact-sheet-president-biden-sends-immigration-bill-to-congress-as-part-of-his-commitment-to-modernize-our-immigration-system/>.
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The *JustSouth Quarterly* is published 4 times a year by, and available without charge from, the Jesuit Social Research Institute, College of Arts and Sciences, Loyola University New Orleans, 6363 St. Charles Avenue, Box 94, New Orleans, LA 70118

The *JustSouth Monthly* is published 12 times a year and is available upon request without charge at jsri@loyno.edu. Copyright 2014 © Jesuit Social Research Institute. ISSN 2161-315X

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