

To Earn Our Livelihoods
by Fr. John S. Rausch

This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire, one of the worst industrial accidents in U.S. history. In 1911, on a Saturday afternoon when workers began thinking about their Sunday off, a fire started on the eighth floor of the ten-story Asch Building in Manhattan where the Triangle Company occupied the top three floors with 500 workers. The flames spread quickly to the upper floors trapping many amid the burning fabric and trimmings that lay bundled and loose in numerous piles. Witnesses reported the horror of seeing workers, many embracing one another, leap to their deaths from windows as the fire engulfed them. The tragic toll numbered 146 dead, mostly immigrant girls and women, with scores more seriously injured, because the company owners locked the stairwell doors leaving only the two freight elevators that failed for an escape.

More than a century ago workers regularly logged twelve hour shifts six days a week. In 1880 one sixth of American workers (1,118,000) were children under the age of sixteen. In 1889 alone 22,000 railroad workers were killed or injured on the job. Because wages fluctuated with the economy, the Carnegie Steel Company in 1892 cut pay between 18% and 26% leading to the Homestead Strike that ended in bloody violence. Only a century ago the human dignity of American workers was sacrificed to the new wave of industrialization.

These conditions prompted Pope Leo XIII to write his groundbreaking encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, in 1891. His letter rejected both an unbridled capitalism that could deny workers their God-given human dignity, and an ultra-powerful state that could destroy human initiative. In their 2011 Labor Day Statement the Catholic bishops write: "This encyclical is best remembered for Pope Leo's prophetic call for the Church to support workers' associations for the protection of workers and the advancement of the common good."

Unfortunately today, most Americans remain ignorant of labor history and the struggles our forebearers endured to create the working conditions that insure a more dignified work place. Child labor laws, workman's compensation, Social Security and retirement programs, health and safety laws, and the eight-hour workday all represent progressive reforms supported by organized labor and the church. Each required a piece of legislation, which instinctively means that without due vigilance the strands of labor's safety net can fray, or be cut, for the sake of deficit reductions or economic efficiency and growth.

Already some states have legislated to restrict the bargaining rights of public employees, soften child labor standards and diminish health and safety laws. The arguments come directly from a strongly free market approach: public employees make too much money, young people need work experience and excessive red tape leads to lost productivity and inefficiency.

For people of faith the dignity of workers rests not on any privilege afforded by the state, or a particular economic theory, but on moral and ethical laws that must never be denied workers. Each worker is made in the image and likeness of God and we are all our brother's (and sister's) keeper. This theological statement forms the basis for the dignity of each worker and the call to community and the common good.

"People need work not only to pay bills...but also to express their human dignity and to enrich and strengthen the larger community," reads the bishops 2011 Labor Day statement. They are not promoting making money or getting rich, but encouraging a spirituality for workers to earn their livelihood by building community, both among themselves and for the good of all.