

AN ETHICAL REFLECTION ON WORK AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

By Sr. Brenda Walsh, Racine Dominican

In recent times, there has been a lot of interest and discussion about work and economic development. These issues were also discussed in the recent State of the Union address by President Barach Obama. Why are they so important? Work is the creative expression of our gifts and talents to be used in the service of a world that is peaceful, humane and ecologically safe. Through work people shape their own lives as well as the lives of their families and community. Meaningful and stable work is the foundation for security in the family, neighborhood and society. President Obama in his address to the nation, expressed his hope and efforts for a just, stable and growing economy. This is a human issue and therefore an ethical issue.

The opportunity to work belongs to every human being who desires and has the ability to work. The opportunity to do meaningful work improves the quality of life for others as a basic human right. For many years we have discussed full employment as a goal but it was never taken very seriously. It still needs to be pursued with vigor. It must take into account the rights of minorities and women, people with disabilities and young and the aged. A just wage and a safe working environment are essential elements to be considered. Environmental concerns, energy use that is safe and good for the environment are also coming to the fore at this time. We are at a crossroads in the world of work and production, due to new developments in economic, technological and political conditions of our time. The internationalization of production, high technology, the present crisis of plant closings resulting in high unemployment have left millions in severe economic upheaval that is likely to last for some time to come. We also need to base our economic development efforts use technology for just and peaceful ends and not for weapons of destruction. We are called to use our technology to benefit the entire human family, which currently is greatly lacking in basic human needs such as food, health care, housing and education. What kind of world do we want to live in during the years to come? The choices we make today will greatly impact the answer to this question.

We need to develop an economic system:

- that allows workers to participate in the decision-making processes affecting their work lives
- that promotes cooperation between worker and management

- that provides adequate training and placement opportunities for jobs now and in the future
- that provides a just wage and a safe environment
- that is sensitive to urban-rural interconnectedness
- that considers the rights of minorities, including women, persons with disabilities and the young and elderly
- that is devised to serve people and is not allowed to violate the priority of people over profit
- that prepares workers for work needed, and encourages excellence in the workplace as a joint responsibility of employer and employee
- that is socially responsible and accountable to the local community

Some communities are exploring ways of keep the wealth within the community. Examples are described in Community Wealth at www.communitywealth.com

The founder of this group is Gar Alperowicz, a Racine, Wisconsin native. Local people are trained to develop cooperatives to meet the needs of local people and to share in the profits of the company.

Institutionalized injustice is found in many of our institutions, culture, and society and within our economic system. Institutions were shaped by humans and can be re-structured by the same humans in the service of a just, peaceful and secure world. Our responsibility is to examine our own institutions and work toward that end.

Several years ago, a great social justice advocate, Joe Holland offered this advice:

“The community must be the foundation of economic, political and cultural life. We need to affirm co-operation over competition as the foundation of our society. The key principle is to build accountability of capital and technology to the community. This is the vision we have – of people as a community, of a people called by God and accountable to ourselves and to each other and to the rest of the world and above all to the poor and powerless among us. Basically, our future is with the community. Coupled with this local effort, planning and action are needed at a national and global level, by working for full employment for all, in the service of a world that is human, along with a just living wage and safe working conditions. Economics in its derivation, means the “management of the household.” Its main goal, therefore, should be to see that all member of the human family have the opportunity to live a full and meaningful existence.

Our ask is to face our economic contradictions and to ensure that the system serves the human family, especially those with the greatest need, and that contributes to the building of a peaceful world. In this way, we can pass on a future with hope to generations still to come.
Let us begin today courageously.