

Nonviolence and the Rights of Workers



Season For Nonviolence 2025

Week 7

Addressing the Rights of Workers Through Nonviolent Action

We are convinced that nonviolence is more powerful than violence. We are convinced that nonviolence supports you if you have a just and moral cause.... If you use violence, you have to sell part of yourself for that violence. Then, you are no longer a master of your own struggle.

Cesar Chavez

To our friends on the journey of the nonviolent Jesus,

It is likely the most prevalent violence experienced by people in this country is worker rights abuses:

- wage theft
- health and safety violations
- the billion-dollar industry that advises employers on ways to fight unionization
- lack of family-supporting wages
- lack of benefits like health care, pensions, and paid vacations
- the huge number of day labor agencies that allows exploitation of workers

Assaults on our physical well-being and ability to fairly provide for ourselves or our families is tangible violence. The movement for securing labor rights is not separate from the movement for securing civil rights.

In the know

- The first Catholic Social Teaching Encyclical, [*Rerum Novarum – On Capital and Labor*](#), was issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891.

- Worker Justice is based on [Catholic Social Teaching](#) values such as respect and dignity, hence there is no place for violence.
- Worker justice advocates are often racial justice activists who are grounded in the nonviolent Civil Rights movement. Nonviolent strategies include people of faith visiting employers to ask for “stolen wages” that are illegally withheld, encouraging employers to respect workers’ rights to organize, standing with workers on prayer vigils and picket lines, and writing letters to the editor and elected representatives.

What does Scripture say?

You shall not exploit a poor and needy hired servant, whether one of your own kindred or one of the resident aliens who live in your land, within your gates. On each day you shall pay the servant’s wages before the sun goes down, since the servant is poor and is counting on them. Otherwise the servant will cry to the Lord against you, and you will be held guilty.

(Deuteronomy 24:14-15)

... and (Jesus) said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’

(Matthew 20:4)

A Nonviolent Hero



Cesario Estrada Chavez (1927 – 1993) was a Catholic American labor leader and civil rights activist. Along with Dolores Huerta and lesser-known Gilbert Padilla, he co-founded the National Farm Workers Association, which later merged with the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee to become the United Farm Workers labor union. He was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1994. Possibly most notable is his successful leadership of the Delano grape strike of 1965–1970 which employed non-violent measures, including pickets and boycotts, to pressure farm owners into granting strikers' demands. He imbued his campaigns with Catholic activities, including public processions, Masses, and fasts.

Who should you contact to stand with workers in Milwaukee?

[The Poor People's Campaign](#) is made up of Wisconsin's residents, religious leaders, organizations, and local communities, coming together across historic lines of division to fight systemic poverty, systemic racism, the war economy, environmental devastation, the denial of health care, and the false moral narrative of religious nationalism.

[Worker Justice Wisconsin](#) advances justice in our community by building collective worker power together with faith and labor allies.

[Network](#) is a Catholic advocacy organization working to achieve equity and justice for everyone with tens of thousands of justice-seekers— women and men, secular and religious — across the country. The current agenda, [An Economy for All](#), brings a focus to advocacy for workers.

Active Nonviolence Opportunities

Easy: Pray a [Prayer for Work](#) daily from the [Social Justice Resource Center](#):

God of creation, the world, all that grows on it, all that roams it, and ourselves too are the work of your hands.

By your gift they are also our work.

Guide and govern us so that our labor may bring your creation to perfection.

Give to men and women work that enhances their human dignity, and draws them closer in service to their brothers and sisters.

Have compassion on those who despair of ever achieving work.

Direct the non-violent efforts of your church to champion their plight and bring them hope.

A Bit More: We are called to shape a constituency of conscience, measuring every policy by how it touches the least, the lost, and the left-out among us. This [letter](#) from the United States Council of Catholic Bishops calls us to conversion and common action, to new forms of stewardship, service, and citizenship.

All In: Learn more about [boycotts](#) of businesses and products that exploit workers' rights. Commit to a personal/family boycott of one of these businesses for one day, one week, one month, or one year!

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace: where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy. Amen