

Business

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A cliffhanger ending for the ages. PHIL ROSENTHAL, PAGE 4

Churches, unions keep faith

Hyatt protests point to renewed ties between religious leaders, labor

By Julie Wernau
TRIBUNE REPORTER

When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, he wasn't just making history, he was organizing a labor movement, said the Rev. Lillian Daniel.

"It was the very first strike, and they won," the Glen Ellyn pastor boomed during an interfaith prayer service of union members

held outside the Hyatt Regency Chicago.

Hyatt's owners, locked in contract negotiations with Unite Here Local 1, increasingly are being criticized by religious leaders siding with the hotel workers. Such protests illustrate the labor movement's increasing propensity to team picket signs with prayer shawls.

In September 2009, two dozen religious leaders joined the local chapter of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in a 36-hour vigil in solidarity with employees at Resurrection Health Care, the largest

Catholic health care system in Chicago. The event came just three months after a delegation of more than 100 religious leaders stormed Hyatt's first shareholders meeting, singing a psalm.

The movement is larger than Chicago. This year more than 70 religious leaders joined with union leaders from the American Federation of Teachers to mobilize on several fronts, from immigration reform to civic engagement, as part of a task force called Faith in Action.

At the same time, two of the

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Scott Simon, left, and Michael Davis lead a procession of religious leaders outside the Hyatt Regency on Nov. 4. MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

Labor movement, religious leaders team up in tough times

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largest union organizations in the country, the AFL-CIO and the Service Employees International Union, joined with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to publish guidelines for polite labor relations between Catholic health care institutions and unions.

Unions aren't the only ones that stand to gain by such a powerful marriage. Financial donations to religious organizations have declined as a result of the recession's toll on jobs.

"These are people in service industry jobs who need to provide for their families," said the Rev. Jacques Conway, pastor of Neighborhood United Methodist Church, in Maywood. "If they're not able to do that, then ultimately, they're not able to support the ministry and the churches, and we're not able to do what we are called to do. So, we are connected."

Chicago-based Interfaith Worker Justice, one of the best-known social justice



The Reformed Cantors of Chicago protest outside the Hyatt Regency on behalf of housekeeping workers on Nov. 4. MICHAEL TERCHA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

said the religious commu- Forest and a past president as well as a contrification of used W... "id E...

its goal is to mobilize the religious community to improve conditions for workers, and its presence has made the newfound religion of labor even more visible in Chicago.

"There are people who have this hate of unions and think their clergy should just be preaching in the pulpit and not be out in the world. But I think most religious leaders believe that to separate their faith from what goes on in the world is to separate their faith from life," said Kim Bobo, executive director of Interfaith Worker Justice.

Bobo, choir director at the Good News Community Church in Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood,

front end," she said.

DeLisa Saunders, deputy director of human rights and community relations at the American Federation of Teachers, said about three years ago religious leaders and union organizers decided to formalize a previously informal relationship with the formation of Faith in Action.

"I think there's a dire need, and in these times I think most organizations and leaders are being much more creative and are willing to partner and share research so that we can gain strength," Saunders said.

Victor Mirelman, rabbi emeritus of West Suburban Temple Har Zio in River

fortune through the work of others; they should also be responsible to make them as comfortable as possible," he said.

Ties between labor and religion trace to the 1930s and 1950s, when religious institutions, particularly Jewish and Catholic, and unions shared large immigrant populations, Bobo said.

By midcentury, there were close to 200 Catholic labor schools operating out of parish basements to teach workers about their rights and how to organize. Similarly, Jewish labor lyceums were connected to synagogues.

But differences that grew out of the Vietnam War era,

Faith and work are inextricably linked for most of the working class, said Bob Bruno, director of the Labor Education Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"For a lot of these folks, if a business doesn't provide health care, it could be characterized as not taking care of the stranger on the

a survey of union members he conducted from 2005 to 2006. Eighty percent believe God performs miracles in the world today.

"Overwhelmingly, these union members were people of faith," he said. "Bus drivers, steel workers, carpenters, manufacturing workers believed in God and were motivated, in

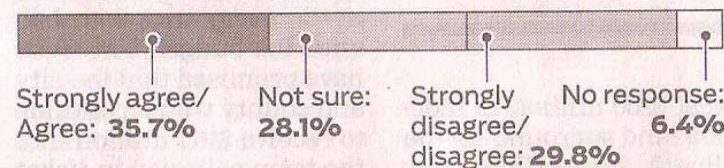
"They try to bring the argument to the modern-day pharaohs," he said. "Hey, you claim to be Christian, you claim to be a Jew, you claim to be Muslim, why are you treating your people this way? You can't hide behind your glass office."

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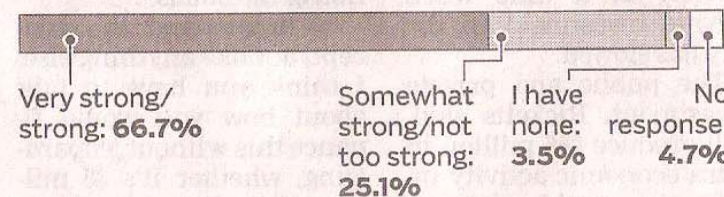
Faith and organized labor

A University of Illinois study found that the vast majority of union members are Christian with a strong faith, but that this description is not all-encompassing.

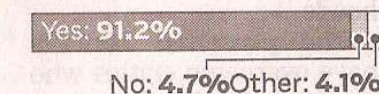
"When there is conflict between workers and employers in the community, the leaders of my church/house of worship should get involved in helping the workers."



"How strong is your religious belief?"



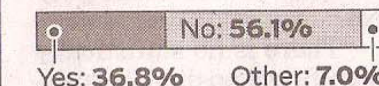
"Do you believe in God?"



"Do you believe that God is performing miracles in the world today?"



"My faith calls on me to accept my working conditions no matter how difficult."



SOURCES: 2005-06 survey of union members by the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations at the University of Illinois