



2005 ATFE Biennium

**WORKERS RIGHTS AND FIELD
EDUCATION**

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Workers Rights and Field Education

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This workshop explored how encouraging seminary students to engage with worker rights concerns in their own communities helps them begin to think theologically of the church's response to class, race and gender concerns. This is because injustices in the workplace bring these three issues to the forefront in a powerful way.

The workshop began with two guest speakers. We asked the first one to be our 'student case study'. Andrew Schweibert, a seminary student at Pacific School of Religion, presented his own experience as a summer intern in the program sponsored by the National Interfaith Committee on Worker Justice (Seminary Summer) as a case study and explained how this internship has shaped his understanding of ministry. He told how it is shaping his understanding of the pastoral ministry and church as he encountered pastors and churches that have engaged the issues of work and workers in our society. His presentation is attached.

The second guest was Ms. Joy Heine, the director of the Religion and Work Project of the Interfaith Worker Justice non-profit organization based in Chicago, Illinois. This organization co-sponsors with the AFL-CIO the program "Seminary Summer" a ten week internship of faith and action for workplace justice which can be taken for academic credit in most cases. She spoke of the initiative "Religion and Work" that gathers seminary professors nationwide to network for the sharing of resources on teaching about religious perspective on work.

As Field Education faculty preparing students for ministry, we developed this workshop because of our recognition that the work life of congregants is seldom integral to the life of the congregation. Since most congregants spend the major portion of their lives in some form of work, it is critical that pastors understand what is happening in the work world. Furthermore, we need to hear from workers. Much of the material on work is written for and by business leaders and professionals. There is very little theological and social analysis about the nature of workers lives both within the present national economic system and within the globalization of economic life. We have discovered that there is a pervasive distrust of unions and 'corrupt' leadership, but very little advocacy for the working conditions of workers within our churches.

In the present social and economic realities of globalization, it is critical that our churches engage in theological reflection and practices that are not captive to one economic system and are reflecting upon the implications for all of creation in what is happening globally, ecologically and socially to the workers of the world and to the future sustainability of our earth.

The workshop participants and leaders shared what they were doing in their respective schools with theological students with respect to worker justice. The workshop revealed a growing interest in worker justice issues among theological students and the field educators encouraged each other to continue to lift these up in placement settings. Participants hope to have more to share at the next biennial from doing further work in this area. Participants also were appreciative of meeting each other in order to network in-between biennials as needed.