Polarizing Precarious Perplexing

Craig B. Mousin
Polarizing, Precarious, and Perplexing

The dignity of each employee at a Catholic college should influence decisions about allocating resources and determining policies.

By Rev. Craig B. Mousin, university ombudsperson, DePaul University

"Precarious work is a worldwide phenomenon," concludes sociologist Arne Kalleberg, who defines precarious as work that is "uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker."

Kalleberg subsequently wrote in Good Jobs, Bad Jobs that not only do we face a worldwide tragedy of precarious employment, but that work itself has become polarized with an expanding gap dividing those who have good jobs from those who have bad jobs. Kalleberg explains that good jobs offer more than simply adequate compensation, but also job security and a place where one can develop a "life narrative" from work.

Today, precarious work has spread to many occupations within all sectors of the economy. The threat to the very existence of one’s job negates many of the benefits that work typically provides. Simultaneously, as the majority of the workforce has seen little increase in wages over the last several decades, the middle class has diminished and income inequality has grown, further polarizing the workforce.

Although few might doubt that globalization, economic recession, and structural changes have made work more precarious in recent years, Kalleberg’s review leaves one with a perplexing question: Where is the voice of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) in the contemporary workplace?

A Notable History

Although Kalleberg echoes ideas found deep within CST regarding human fulfillment through work and the importance of work for an individual’s self-esteem, the contemporary public discussion surrounding precarious work finds little recognition of CST’s historical contribution to the reduction of precarious work in the early 20th century through the Great Compression of the mid-20th century, when employment in the United States led to periods of reduced inequality.

In the 1940s, after many of the New Deal’s labor reforms had been enacted, President Franklin Roosevelt praised Msgr. John A. Ryan’s service in raising the goals of CST in support of those reforms: “With voice and pen, you have pleaded the cause of social justice and the right of the individual to happiness through economic security, a living wage, and an opportunity to share in the things that enrich and ennoble human life.”

But Ryan did not advocate his religious perspective alone. Ryan credited the Catholics who, as early as 1500, had begun to argue for the role of government to regulate employment and relief for the workers. He celebrated the work of Frederic Ozanam, one of the principal founders of the Society of St. Vincent DePaul in the early 1800s, who had argued for a living wage and government encouragement of workers’ associations to negotiate on behalf of workers.

The poverty of France and the lack of respect for the dignity of workers and their families caused much of the precarious nature of employment under such an economic system. Ozanam joined with other French Catholics who sought to navigate between the unprotected employment of workers under laisser-faire economics and complete regulation by socialism and communism. Subsequently, Pope Leo XIII’s Encyclical Rerum Novarum, influenced in part by those French Catholics, developed CST’s distinct path to recognize the role of capital while upholding the dignity and rights of workers and provided a strong foundation for Ryan’s advocacy.

In Policy and Practice

It may be that scholars talk within their spheres of influence and business leaders speak within their...
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language of the workplace, and never the twain should meet. Yet, Catholic colleges and universities would seem the best place to breach the barriers by providing a workplace that is an effective laboratory of CST in action. CST’s foundation in the dignity of each person—who is not a commodity, but a member of the human community created in the image of God—provides one starting point. Above all considerations, the dignity of each person—each student, staff, and faculty member—should influence daily decisions about allocating resources and determining employment policies.

For example, the government’s attempt to discourage undocumented immigrants from working led Congress to establish the employer’s duty to collect and file I-9 forms documenting employment authorization, with risk of substantial fines for non-compliance. The legislation enacting I-9s was highly contentious and also challenged CST’s nuanced understanding of welcoming the sojourner and care of the immigrant. Although most Catholic institutions have not quarreled with their duty to comply, the implementation of the I-9 process and the fear of non-compliance may negatively affect lawful immigrants or persons who may be perceived as foreign-born, while also causing undue stress to employees charged with ensuring compliance. Engaging CST through implementation of the process would honor the dignity of all involved while still ensuring legal compliance.

CST not only assists in determining the effect of the process on human dignity, but also raises the question of how religious institutions operate in a secular society. As Martin Marty and James Serritella warn, “Primarily, religious bodies should not put aside their theology and doctrine when entering the secular area, but should instead make sure that their religious polity is internally clear and in the forefront of consideration when adopting legal structure or drawing up legal documents.”

Although Marty and Serritella were speaking specifically about how religious institutions might organize themselves under U.S. law, their advice bears following in formulating policies and practices. How do our attorneys, compliance officers, financial experts, and managers interpret their respective professions in light of CST? Do we ask prospective


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Giving Voice to CST in the Workplace

trustees if they understand how to reconcile CST and their fiduciary duty to our institutions? Have we developed a vocabulary that gives voice to CST within the workplace?

For example, laws initiated in the New Deal era legislating the normal work-week permit exempt employees to work extra hours without the necessity of overtime pay. Recently, the federal government raised the question whether some employers have abused the intent of these laws by classifying too many employees as exempt. In addition, even properly classified exempt employees face the challenge of working too many hours beyond what the legislation may have intended. Engaging CST in a conversation about the purpose of work and the flourishing of each employee, along with the appropriate balance with home and community commitments, would start to address concerns about abuse of the system.

Going Beyond Business

CST evolved from extremely challenging times. Today, the great disruption caused by precarious work in a polarized society necessitates a new response.

A recent Wall Street Journal article suggests that the business world is catching on: “Lately, . . . some big investors have worried [that] increasing income and wealth gaps threaten the economy’s ability to expand.”

For their part, Catholic colleges and universities could provide an additional example of how inequality and precarious work diminishes the effectiveness and success of our workplaces. CST has consistently stressed that inequality has costs, not just to economics, but to the realization of human dignity in the workplace. Will our practice merge with our vision in earning an invitation to the discussion? □

We invite you to respond to this column through the Human Resources and Mission blog. We plan to address specific ways CST can influence employment decisions in future columns. Please send examples or questions regarding CST to help us fully address CST in the 21st century workplace.

The opinions expressed in this column are the author's alone and do not represent those of DePaul University or the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities.

7 Justin Lahart, “Worry Over Inequality Occupies Wall Street; Gulf Between Haves and Have-Not May Hurt Economy,” Wall Street Journal (online), 10 November 2013.