



by Rabbi Robert J. Marx

It is easy to make a statement. It is not always easy to make one's life into a statement. More than pious sentiments are truly needed in order to support the working men and women of America. The Employee Free Choice Act offers an important opportunity to offer more than words to support the just goals of millions of working people.

Every major religion is sympathetic to the laborer. Judaism was early among the major religions in its assertion that labor involved more than mere economic activity. The commandment to observe the Sabbath was as much an affirmation of human dignity as of divine authority. "Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work." But the seventh day was to be holy – holy in the eyes of God, but equally important – holy in its respect for all who work.

When the prophet Elijah was forced to flee from the powerful anger of Ahab and Jezebel, he took refuge in a wilderness cave. Persecuted and desperate, he needed to find comfort in his God. There was a mighty wind. There was an earthquake. There was a fire. But God was in none of these. Finally, there was a "still small voice" and in that voice Elijah found his God. The still small voice is never easy to hear. And it often reaches us at surprising moments and through those who are neither powerful nor articulate.

It is not always easy to translate the very sanctity of labor into terms that have meaning in our times, times in which the market place seems to have been elevated above all other holy altars. The Employee Free Choice Act presents an opportunity to give concrete meaning to the often frustrated dream of a just society. To be sure, the Act is controversial precisely because it provides an effective and concrete way for workers to organize. And it opens a path toward transformational change. Adoption of the Employee Free Choice Act gives working

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work.... therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

—Exodus 20:9-11

people the strength and the opportunity to emerge from the despair that so often encumbers their lives.

What is troubling to many of us who support the Employee Free Choice Act is the strength of the opposition. The provisions of the Act embody the very ideals that make America great. It provides that the will of the majority cannot become a slave to the self interests of the few. Under the provisions of the proposed act, if a majority of workers sign an authorization form expressing their desire to join a union, then procedures should be set in place allowing them to do so. The Act provides for federal mediation if workers and employers cannot agree upon the terms of an initial contract. Under present law, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) may take action against a union when it violates certain secondary boycott agreements. The new act would provide that the NLRB must also take action against an employer who unfairly discharges or threatens an employee who is involved in organizing a union. The proposed law has penalties for proven discrimination, and provides legal access to workers faced with discrimination. The Employee Free Choice Act is a way of balancing the scales of justice. It is a way of giving workers rights that most of us would take for granted.

America depends upon its working people. It is these workers that make our country great. They are not some invisible "them." They are us – each one of us who is part of the American dream. Our country's workers have not lost their voice. Enactment of the Employee Free Choice Act will allow us all to hear it a little more clearly.

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