

# God may or may not take sides in labor disputes — but 'Father Bob' does

By **DON McINTOSH**  
Associate Editor

Does God take sides in labor disputes? That's a question over which believers might disagree. But when workers stand up for their rights, Robert Krueger knows which side he's on.

"Father Bob," as he's known, says mass three times a week at St. Francis Catholic Church in Southeast Portland. At age 80, he's semi-retired as a diocesan priest. Yet he remains one of the most active local religious leaders in speaking up for economic morality.

Krueger is a member of the steering committee of the union-backed solidarity group Portland Jobs With Justice. Dressed in clerical garb, he's a regular presence at marches and rallies for workers' rights.

There's nothing heretical about that. Krueger's positions are grounded in the church social teachings he learned in the 1940s as a student at Portland's Central Catholic High School. There and at Mt. Angel Seminary, Krueger studied "Rerum Novarum," an open letter to Catholic bishops written by Pope Leo XIII in 1891.

"The [letter] says because of our dignity as human beings, made in the image of God, workers have rights to be able to fulfill their destiny, to receive sufficient compensation, to be treated well, that they have the right to organize and bargain collectively and strike if necessary," Krueger said. "We learned that as kids, and I never forgot."

After joining the priesthood, Krueger worked as teacher and administrator at St. Mary's Home for Boys and then at Central Catholic. Later, he was a parish priest at St. Charles Borromeo in Portland, Sacred Heart in Medford, and finally St. Andrew in Portland. Five years ago he retired.

While at St. Andrew, Krueger was recruited to the labor cause by a

parishioner, Jean Eilers. Eilers, herself a former nun, was then state director for the national AFL-CIO. In 1997, she asked Krueger to stand up for Steelworkers in Pueblo, Colorado, who were on strike against unfair labor practices by their employer, Oregon Steel Mills.

Krueger agreed, and was one of about 20 who committed civil disobedience in the downtown Portland lobby of Wells Fargo bank, which was the company's chief lender. The protesters refused to leave, and were arrested for trespass. All were acquitted. But the protest was a turning point for Krueger.

"I stayed with it, because I deeply believe in it," Krueger said.

In Krueger's view, his religion's founder — Jesus of Nazareth — was an anti-establishment utopian who fraternized with the poorest of society, not with civil or religious leaders.

"I'm convinced that Jesus was trying to restore a just community as you'd find in the scriptures of the Old Testament, beginning with Moses."

Krueger said a theme of justice runs throughout the old and new testaments, such as the book of Deuteronomy, which spells out the duty of paying a just wage, not only to fellow Hebrews, but to foreigners they employ.

Krueger's sympathy with the poorest workers often translates into support for the rights of immigrant workers. Krueger is there when the new day labor center needs someone to give a blessing, or when janitors are rallying for the right to unionize.

And Portland's Archbishop John Vlazny has been supportive of his activism, Krueger said, even when it places him at odds with managers at Catholic-owned Providence Health System — which has opposed a long-running unionization campaign by support workers.

As a member of Jobs With Justice' Faith-Labor Committee, Krueger is a bridge between organized religion and organized labor. But he also has words of criticism for both. People of faith need to step up more and get involved in issues of justice. And labor leaders need to ground their campaigns on moral issues like dignity and fairness, not just material concerns like wages and benefits.

"I think we have an interesting problem in the United States," Krueger said. "We have a standard of living that can not be maintained worldwide. And workers at the high end of the financial spectrum are consuming at a higher rate than we have a right to. And so the question becomes, 'How much money should they make?' But then at the same time, corporations are making huge amounts of money, and should not the workers participate in that? It's a dilemma."

"Ultimately, the best thing would be for labor



Standing in the bed of a pickup truck, Father Bob Krueger speaks to striking Oak Harbor Freight Lines workers at a Dec. 4 rally in Portland.

and management to work together," Krueger said. "But when conflicts do break out, I'm not a mediator, but an advocate. I see myself as a witness for justice. Because I think, in too many cases, workers are not getting justice."

Portland Jobs With Justice will hold its seventh annual "faith and labor breakfast," at 7:15 a.m. Tuesday, Feb. 24 at Immaculate Heart Parish, 2926 N. Williams Ave., Portland. The event brings together leaders and activists from faith and labor communities to explore ways to work together. This year's breakfast will include discussion and a presentation about faith community involvement in last year's successful sit-down strike by workers at Republic Window and Door in Chicago. Cost is \$7 per person; register by calling 503 236-5573.



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