**Have Mercy: With God on Our Side: The Struggle for Workers’ Rights in a Catholic Hospital. Mike Miller. *New Labor Forum. January/February 2013. Vol 22 #1.***

[Adam D. Reich](http://nlf.sagepub.com/search?author1=Adam+D.+Reich&sortspec=date&submit=Submit) *With God on Our Side: The Struggle for Workers’ Rights in a Catholic Hospital*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-8014-5066-2.

With labor almost flat on its back, a good organizing story is especially welcome. Adam Reich tells one.

Workers at Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital want a union. Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange (SSJO) own the hospital. They possess a notable record of social and economic justice involvement, including with César Chávez and the farm workers union and a presence in El Salvador at a time when that meant putting your body on the line. They think a union interferes with patient care. First, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and then its rebel split-off, the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), become engaged in a deep theological conversation with the sisters.

The union comes to recognize that it must be more than a vehicle for “bread-and-butter” issues; it must act and be seen as a moral agent. Two Catholic union organizers take the workers, their secular leftish fellow organizers, their employer, and the broader community through a vigorous campaign of theological education in addition to a typical organizing drive. They are guided by more than one hundred years of official Catholic Church teachings on economic justice and the right of workers to organize unions and an American tradition of Catholic hierarchy support for unions going back far longer. NUHW recognizes that worker personhood is inextricably linked to doing a good job, and incorporates this understanding in its organizing. The sisters are persuaded; the workers come to see the union as a protector of patients, not only of their material interests.

All of this is told in rich detail. *With God on Our Side* covers a nine-year period. Shortly after it was published, NUHW and SSJO signed a contract and reached an employer neutrality agreement for other SSJO hospitals. Reich also raises issues, especially for public and large nonprofit employee unions, that go far beyond this specific struggle.

While Reich’s story raises issues that are relevant to many unions, especially those in health care, it also has some unique elements. The SSJO is unusual, even among Catholic women religious, for its special commitment to economic and social justice. NUHW is unusual in its special character as an upstart union with claims for a broad understanding of “social movement” unionism. But the struggle to unionize workers in Catholic hospitals has been going on for some time. Too often, in relation to their own rank-and-file employees, Catholic hospital administrators are not all that different from other nonprofit hospital administrators who, in turn, are not all that different from for-profit hospital administrators. In all of these settings, employers have argued against unions because of the particular nature of health care work. They claimed that unions would interfere in the patient relationship, and they implied or actively argued that managers were the best custodians of that relationship and, indirectly, of the broader public good. For many years, this argument worked with health care workers, particularly those with a direct interface with patients.

In the case of the extensive Catholic hospital system, the argument also provoked serious contention within the religious community itself. Catholic theologians, members of the hierarchy, priests, nuns, and lay activists all got involved. The pages of the *National Catholic Reporter* (kind of a *Nation* magazine for Catholics), for example, were filled with the debate. Nor was the discussion limited to the liberal end of the Catholic spectrum of opinion. In their *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, Fourth Edition*, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops recognized “the rights of employees to organize and bargain collectively without prejudice to the common good.” In the final reckoning, theological “discernment” played an important role in convincing the SSJO sisters to settle.

But there is sometimes a piece of truth in the employer arguments as well. To the extent that a hospital administration is mission driven (with quality health care being the mission), and to the extent that unions limit their focus to wages, hours, benefits, and a narrow understanding of working conditions, then just to that extent is management the protector of the mission. And when management protects the mission, the public will be, *for good reasons*, susceptible to antiunion “propaganda.” At the same time, workers will be frustrated by their union. Reich effectively presents the case for unions to care about quality service to patients.

Reich accepts some formulations that are debatable, such as the contrast between “top-down” and “bottom-up” organizing and his “synthesis” of the two. He is not alone in making this distinction, but there is a problem in it if it is viewed as a complete picture of two different kinds of unions. Even the most democratic “bottom-up” union acts in a “top-down” manner when it is in the middle of a campaign. If the process that led to the campaign is a good one, the membership will “own” the campaign. At that point, leadership at “the top” mobilizes members, constituencies, and the broader public—a “top-down” process. During the campaign, moments of debate and other community building activities democratically engage the members so they “own” their union. Then the organization’s focus returns to mobilization. An effective campaign will continuously move back and forth between these two, with the potential for errors in each direction. Action—expressed in campaigns—is the lifeblood of an organization. But an organization that only engages in action ends up as a group of activists who speak for others rather than engaging them to speak for themselves. And without members engaged to speak for themselves, the people power that makes victory possible is undermined.

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Another conceptual difficulty is in Reich’s discussion of internal union politics versus process. He juxtaposes power versus culture, but a clearer formulation might focus on goals and thus contrast material gains versus moral values. Power is a means. It is value neutral, capable of being used for good or ill, and it can be organized in liberating or repressive ways.

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Reich’s understanding of what constitutes “relational” organizing is weak. The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) is also working in the area near the hospital to develop a community organization. The IAF’s process very carefully seeks to build on and deepen value-based relationships and to build action on interests grounded in those relationships. Because of this, the IAF would not mobilize its members to support NUHW, but it did help “union leaders secure meetings with some significant religious leaders in Southern California during the campaign,” a point that Reich relegates to a footnote (p. 162). Yet this kind of support is, in fact, among the most important things the IAF could contribute to the union. It says, in effect, “you trust me, I trust them, please extend your trust for me to them.” This weakness in Reich’s understanding of relational organizing diminishes the power of his analysis.

Ironically, Reich understands that “the union had its own agenda and its own timeline.” So did the community organizers. Synchronizing timelines and agendas requires a lot of planning and relationships among the staff and leaders of separate organizations—something not available to either the union or the community organization because each had separate campaigns already underway. So, Reich claims, “IAF organizers refused to commit to particular ‘turnout’ numbers for union events or to deliver specific, measurable results for the union.” In Reich’s view, this shows “the absurdity of their failure to work together” (pp. 111-112). Reich wouldn’t expect the union to drop what it was doing for some action organized by a community organization; neither should he (or the union) expect it from IAF.

However, these problems represent a few blemishes on an otherwise excellent work that speaks to issues far beyond this specific case. While Reich calls these “cultural” issues, emphasizing the special character of health care work and of the Catholic sisters, he also recognizes, though insufficiently, their broader significance for unions.

Given the opportunity, I have found that most workers want to do a good job, whatever their work might be. The problem is they often cannot—because of management. When a union treats this interest as outside its purview, or when it identifies such concerns as management’s business, it makes workers powerless to affect the quality, effectiveness, appropriateness, and efficiency of the services or products they create. Yet the possibility for alliances with beneficiaries or customers of their work, as well as making the union more meaningful in workers’ lives, lies precisely in workers’ combined moral *and* material interests. Ignoring them is to invite comments that “blame the unions,” as we now see in campaigns against public employee unions.

Reich challenges unions to broaden their mission. Can they? Doing so will take a reorganization because these issues require more than “representation” and “service”—whether in “business” or “social movement” unions. Union failure to do so will lead to what is now on the horizon: extinction as a major force for the common good.

**Author Biography:**

**Mike Miller** directs the San Francisco-based ORGANIZE Training Center. *Renewing Labor: A Report from the Field*, by Michael Eisenscher and Mike Miller, elaborates many of the ideas in this review. It is available at: mikeotcmiller@gmail.com