

(first published in June 2011 - revised November 2011)

To Strike or not to strike?

Increasing numbers of public sector unions are balloting their members to take strike action as part of a mounting campaign against Government spending cuts and reductions in their pension rights. This will inevitably face many Christians with the challenges like - do I take strike action or not? Should I cross picket lines? Is it right to enjoy benefits which others have campaigned for through industrial action? Phil Jump, recently appointed as chair of ICF, is no stranger to these questions; his working career began in the shipyards of the 1980's which were then a highly unionised environment. In that time he crossed picket lines, worked to rule and as a union branch secretary, organised strike action. He is now Regional Minister of the North Western Baptist Association and offers the following reflections:



My immediate advice to churches would be, whatever you do – don't just ignore it, there will be people in our congregations wrestling with these issues, and the last thing they need is a few trendy worship songs to try and take their mind off it. That was always my biggest struggle, the things happening in my workplace were making headline news, they were regularly the focus of TV and radio reports, yet I can't ever remember anyone at church asking me how I was coping with it all. Churches need to be places where people can talk, pray and seek support in such circumstances.

We also need to avoid simplistic answers; things do not reach the point of serious industrial action unless they have become complex and difficult – tripping out a couple of Bible verses about slaves obeying their masters, does little to help. God has made us thinking people, and His Word reveals deep truths and principles about the world we live in; it is more than a collection of instant clichés for every eventuality, and deserves to be treated as such.

We should not expect that everyone in our church will reach the same conclusion about how to respond, so it is not beyond possibility that an individual could feel it right to cross a picket line that a sister or brother in Christ has chosen to stand on. We need to think about how we express our freedom to think differently and yet maintain the bond of peace and unity that is ours in Christ. This may well be a key pastoral task for ministers and church leaders. For individuals involved in chaplaincy, there are also significant issues and relationships to consider.

In working out an appropriate Christian response, we might consider some of the key principles that are important to us:

Freedom

As followers of Christ, we believe in free will, and have always defended the rights and freedoms of religion and belief. These are principles which continue to protect the Church in her life and witness, so it seems difficult to argue they should not also apply in the world of employment. An individual should be free to withdraw their labour in appropriate circumstances, and this is a liberty which we should value and protect. But this is a two sided coin,

we should also be free to work unhindered, and not put under undue pressure or coercion to withdraw our labour or participate in industrial action if we do not want to. We have of course freely entered into a contract of employment, so while exercising our liberty, we also need to think about our obligations to honour and respect that contract. An important question to consider therefore is whether we feel our employer has breached its terms and spirit, for me this is an important consideration in choosing to withdraw our labour.

It is because of this principle of freedom that I would argue for Christians to get involved in trade unions where they operate, and to play their part in promoting good industrial relations. My experience in the 80's was that many of the more extreme actions were down to the apathy of the moderates who would not turn up at the meetings, or offer a more reasoned perspective. It is too easy to lay the blame at the feet of the militants, while those who have been called as salt and light, are keeping themselves well hidden under the nearest bushel.

Questions that a Christian might ask are:

Are the decisions I am making a genuine expression of free will?

Am I acting in a way which defends and respects the freedom of others to respond as they feel right?

Are there injustices and inappropriate behaviours on either side that I need to challenge or distance myself from?

What is the motivation for my actions?

An important question we need to ask ourselves is "Why am I doing this?" what are the likely gains and losses. At one level this is an entirely practical question, is the potential benefit worth the likely cost? This is a cost which needs to be identified as more than simply lost earnings, but the stress and pressures that it may well place on family life, and the potential impact within our workplace environment in terms of damaged relationships, diminished trust etc. We may feel that these are not particularly Christian concerns, but I would argue that one of the gifts an effective Christian can bring to the workplace is the ability to stand back, think things through and make informed objective decisions. A key question that a serious Christian might ask themselves is "can I help others address and think through these questions?"

There is also a deeper moral question. Some years ago, junior doctors engaged in industrial action because they believed the excessive hours they were expected to work was making them so tired that patients were being put at risk. This seems entirely different than simply striking to achieve improved pay and conditions. This is not to say that one is right and the other is wrong – they are just different. There are issues of justice, which include ensuring that profits and benefits gained through shared employment are appropriately a fairly distributed. Employers have a moral responsibility to show concern for the material well-being of their workforce and to act justly in administering the proceeds of their endeavour. This though reciprocates through employees bearing a fair share of the pain in difficult and hard times. God has called us to be a people who seek justice; He has also called us to put the well-being of others before ourselves.

For a Christian, the core question is whether our motivation for taking action is compatible with the values of our faith. This might include asking whether we are acting out of spite, greed or in anger and frustration, or whether we are pursuing issues of justice, equity and fairness.

What are the key issues at stake?

We need not only to examine our personal motivations for being involved, but also the wider issues that underlie the situation. In particular we might ask what our faith teaches us about them. For example in the junior doctors' dispute mentioned above, one Christian group pointed out the principle of "Sabbath" and argued that the basic, God-ordained, human need for appropriate rest and recuperation was being undermined. It was on this basis that they argued for Christians to be involved in the dispute.

In high profile disputes, churches can play a significant role in helping to highlight these issues and to offer an unbiased reflection on how they are addressed and presented in Scripture. As the situation develops, it is easy to lose sight of these principles and for issues of pride, relationships and face-saving to take over.

What will be the likely impact of my actions?

This question is likely to be significantly influenced by the sector in which we work. For some of us, withdrawing our labour is likely only to affect the profits and operations of our employer, others might leave vulnerable people without the services and support upon which they are reliant – this is a particular issue for many who work in the public sector. Christian people will need to weigh up the needs and well-being of others, against the broader principles which lie behind their strike action.

A particular emphasis of ICF is for Christians to see their work as part of a God-given vocation and calling. If we believe this, then we might argue that withdrawing our labour is to neglect that calling – while this should not compel us to work in every circumstance, it is a consideration which has some bearing on our decision to strike. Of course we may feel that we are striking to protect the job that we do, the services we provide, or to challenge procedures and situations which are preventing us from fulfilling that role.

We also need to think through the potential impact of our actions on the long term well-being of the organisation we work for. If our employer is genuinely in financial difficulty, then no amount of industrial action is likely to change that. If the disruption caused, loses further customers and business opportunities, then we have to seriously ask whether there is any real benefit to what we are doing.

The core question which emerges from this argument is “how will the action I am taking affect the job that I do? – is that an impact which it is appropriate for me to be involved in causing?”

Has every other possible course of action been considered?

It is a widely held principle amongst employers and trade unionists alike, that strike action should be a last resort. An important question for anyone to ask of their union officials and negotiators is whether every possible alternative has been exhausted. Strike action does not replace the need for discussion and negotiation, in fact it increases it; it makes sense therefore to be absolutely certain that a negotiated outcome cannot be achieved without strike action.

Finding alternatives can often involve getting behind the presenting issues to the principles that lie behind them. It may be that through this, alternative ways forward can be found for both sides.

Where do my responsibilities lie?

A significant aspect of our faith identity is a wider sense of responsibility within the world in which we live. We have a responsibility to our employer to be honest, diligent and honourable in our actions and participation. We have a responsibility to our fellow employees to be part of a community and to express active concern for their well-being. We have a responsibility to our family and dependants, particularly if their lifestyle is organised around our work and employment. We have a responsibility to God to be faithful ambassadors of His Kingdom, to show mercy and to seek justice.

Our awareness of these responsibilities might affect our decision whether or not to participate in industrial

action. We might also consider how we might fulfil these responsibilities if we do take this course of action. A local congregation might also consider how they highlight the support needed by those who are affected and involved.

Am I simply withdrawing my labour or is there a more manipulative programme in place?

We have spoken about the important freedom to withdraw our labour and not be compelled to work in conditions which we do not feel are acceptable. While we can argue therefore that Christianity does not legislate against strike action, we have also to ask whether we are genuinely doing simply that, or are part of something more contrived.

Many disputes are planned so that labour is withdrawn at critical times, maximising disruption at relatively little cost to the strikers. There are other situations in which a small core group takes action, forcing a larger contingent to be laid off, who then support and compensate those who are striking. We may or may not believe that this is a fair and appropriate way of organising industrial action – what matters is that we base our thinking and ethics on the full reality of the situation, and recognise that the core principle can often be more than simply whether or not to withdraw our labour.

How am I called to show forgiveness and grace?

There will often be justifiable reasons for taking strike action, but as Christian people we have always to recognise, even when we have been wronged, that at the very heart of our faith is a calling to “turn the other cheek”. Another balance that we have to weigh therefore is between standing on our rights and accepting the situation despite what may be wrong.

This is also an important principle to maintain when we and others are participating in industrial action. We may feel it right to stand on a picket line – this does not mean that we need to be abusive and intimidating towards those who might cross it. Equally if we cross a picket line, in the right circumstances, much can be gained by giving a few moments to listen to the arguments of those taking action, and to articulate why we feel differently. Very often our Christian identity can be displayed not so much by whether or not we get involved in industrial action, but how we conduct ourselves while we are.

Where are the opportunities for reconciliation?

The question above leads us naturally to think about how we can be agents of reconciliation during and after the action has taken place. It is very unusual, as the consequence of strike action, for relationships, confidence and our workplace environment not to be damaged in some way. Reconciliation is vital.

On the one occasion that I was called upon to organise a strike, I did so because I felt I had no choice – the members of the union had taken a ballot and decided by a significant majority that this was what they wanted to do – it was my responsibility to implement their wishes. I called in to see the personnel director an hour before we were due to walk out and told him that I regretted the fact that things had reached the point they had. I also looked him in the eye and told him that he was not my opponent or enemy, it was the actions he had taken that we were in dispute with, not him as a person. I believe that in this encounter, we laid the foundations for a relatively speedy negotiation and return to work; I also believe that industrial relations were significantly improved after that.

God has called us to be reconcilers, and describes the ministry of Christ as reconciling all things. Even before

we take industrial action, effective Christian behaviour can contribute to the healing and restoration that will be needed afterwards

I would summarise all of this in three basic principles:

Do not ignore what is happening – make the church a place where people know they can talk, reflect and pray about what is going on.

Recognise that people will have different perspectives, try to help people act with integrity, grace in pursuit of justice, rather than offering judgements of what is right or wrong.

However you react – never lose sight of those higher principles in the actions that you take and the attitude you adopt.

Revd Phil Jump – Chair, Industrial Christian Fellowship
Regional Minister – North Western Baptist Association

©2011 – Industrial Christian Fellowship