

Taking the Bible Seriously: Seminary Students Stand with Undocumented Food Workers

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We are students of the Bible. A living, pulsing Word. So when seventeen Pomona College employees were fired because they were “undocumented”, when this firing took place precisely at the same time workers were trying to unionize and just happened to target one of the leaders, and when only months before, workers were barred from talking with students during breaks, we were prepared. Workers’ rights, immigration, and treatment of the ‘alien’ in our midst, these are all part of the biblical story:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt (Leviticus 19:33-34; cf. Ex. 22:21, 23:9; Deut. 10:19).

When people think of the Bible, they often imagine a dusty old book relating antiquated morality tales. In fact, they may think the same thing of those who study the Bible: seminarians. So consider their surprise to learn that theology students in Claremont, California, actively support the unionization and ensuing struggles of dining hall workers at Claremont’s Pomona College—a school where many students, not only staff, are immigrants (some undocumented) and second or third generation descendants of immigrants.ⁱ

Seminarians for Social Justice (SSJ) is a student group at Claremont School of Theology (CST) and Claremont Lincoln University that has brought a layer of religious perspective and significance to the struggle for equitable working conditions and compensation for dining hall workers at their neighboring school.

The dining hall workers of Pomona College have struggled tirelessly for years to form a union, only to be met with renewed opposition from the school they have called home. Pomona students and workers founded Workers for Justice (WFJ) a pro-union group, and later joined an international union, UNITE-HERE, in August of 2011. Suddenly, the school began enforcing “a rule barring dining hall employees from talking to students in the cafeteria during their breaks”, a rule which some students attributed to anti-unionization efforts.ⁱⁱ

In November 2011, the board of trustees at Pomona College decided to hold an internal audit of employment documents for dining hall employees of Pomona and within a few days fired seventeen workers (sixteen dining hall staff), some of whom had been working at the school for seven, ten, even twenty, years. Among those fired was Christian Torres, “who still greets dozens of people on campus by first name” and who incidentally was one of the leaders of the unionization efforts.ⁱⁱⁱ

A powerful and moving action took place on December 2nd, at the main Pomona dining hall, when students, faculty, community members, clergy, and fellow workers stood in solidarity with the fired workers as they courageously reported to work the day after being unfairly fired. Samuel Pullen, a member of SSJ and student at CST reflects on his experience that day:

We packed into the student cafeteria at Pomona College. Chef Christian Torres attempted to enter the kitchen where he has worked for the last seven years. One by one, the workers who have been inhumanely fired introduced themselves, stated how many years they have worked there, and testified about why they wanted to continue working at Pomona College. After each worker spoke, the whole assembly chanted, 'We are here to WORK! We are here to WORK!' I was amazed by the courage and conviction of the workers. As workers shared, through tears, just how much their jobs meant to them, and how it would affect their families if they could not return to work, I found myself crying with compassion and outrage. I was inspired to hear workers declare that this would not be the end of their struggle for justice; it was only the beginning. Today, the workers and the students of Pomona College are doing God's work by keeping their faith alive in the face of outright persecution.

Police arrested fifteen nonviolent protestors during that action—a protest supported by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Among those arrested were students and faculty such as Jose Zapata Calderon, “emeritus professor of sociology and Chicano studies at Pitzer College.”^{iv}

Inspired by the passion, strength, and courage of the workers, supportive students, and community members, SSJ has joined Pomona workers on picket lines, rallies, boycotts, religious *posadas*, and civil disobedience actions. Chad Seagle, a second year MA student at CST/CLU focusing in youth ministry, got involved and invited other students from CST/CLU when Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice in Los Angeles (CLUE-LA) signed on to the task of organizing religious leaders in the Claremont/Pomona area. Samuel Pullen, dressed in an alb, voiced his belief in the Biblical command to support those who struggle for justice at a public rally for the workers on February 24, 2012.

CST/CLU students, led by Nina Fernando, participated in a "Banquet in the Streets" on Friday, March 30, 2012, to support the Pomona Dining Hall Workers. This was a symbolic, nonviolent action in which the dining hall workers who were fired last fall demonstrated their willingness to continue serving the students and community members who have been a significant part of their lives. Seminarians from Claremont were asked by Clergy & Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE LA) to occupy a table with twelve people from the CST/CLU community and to participate in a group blessing before the meal is served.

For more information about Claremont School of Theology, Claremont Lincoln University, and the struggle of dining hall workers at Pomona College:

<http://www.facebook.com/EngagedEthics>

<http://www.pomona.edu/administration/communications/special-features/unionization->

[efforts/facts-and-history.aspx](#)

<http://tsl.pomona.edu/articles/2011/9/15/news/281-workers-file-unfair-labor-practice-charges-against-pomona>

ⁱ Ruxandra Guidi, “Students, faculty, former workers divided over firing of undocumented workers at Pomona,” *89.3 KPCC*:

<http://www.scpr.org/news/2012/02/22/31333/pomona-college-still-reacting-undocumented-worker/>.

ⁱⁱ Jennifer Medina, “Immigrant Worker Firings Unsettle a College Campus,” *New York Times*: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/us/after-workers-are-fired-an-immigration-debate-roils-california-campus.html?pagewanted=1&ref=todayspaper>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Wes Woods, “15 arrested at Pomona College dining hall workers protest,” *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*: http://www.dailybulletin.com/ci_19459853.