

Organized labor the topic of community conversation in Glastonbury

By Steve Smith
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Bishop John Selders, the organizing pastor of Amistad United Church of Christ in Hartford, exceeded the program and spoke about the connection between Civil Rights activism and organized labor. (Steve Smith)

Glastonbury — Construction and factory workers might still be the first images that come to mind when talking about unions and organized labor, but healthcare workers, restaurant workers, and educators have taken many of the headlines in just the past few years.

At a Community Conversation held by the Glastonbury Martin Luther King Community Initiative, titled “The New Faces of Organized Labor: The Shift to Service and Tech Workers,” experts in their fields spoke about what’s happening in those and other fields, and gave their perspectives.

Bishop John Selders is the organizing pastor of Amistad United Church of Christ in Hartford, assistant dean of students and coordinator of Community Standards at Trinity College, and one of the leaders of Moral Monday CT. He spoke about how Dr. Martin Luther King supported the labor movement, as it was from there, he said, that the Civil Rights movement has its roots. He said the race riots in East St. Louis in 1917, for example, were really about labor, as was the March on Washington in 1963.

“That riot was one of the biggest in this country, but we don’t talk about it much,” Selders said, adding that in more modern history, the essential workers during the pandemic - including healthcare workers and service workers - were treated like laborers with little organization, until they started to unionize.

“COVID, and the workers who had taken the most risk were getting the least pay, with no hazard gear,” he said. “For me, we were talking about persons of color, brown folks, immigrants, women. It was the same groups of people. These are all connected.”

“[King] wasn’t all about just race relations,” said Michael Cass, officer in charge of the Hartford Office of the National Labor Relations Board. “He really wanted to up the quality of life for the working people of this nation.”

Cass said that workers without unions are still protected if they organize in small ways that many don’t realize.

“You can be protected if you, and at least one other person, are advancing a cause in the place that you work, or complaining about a term or condition, and are retaliated against,” Cass said. “If someone is in an employment situation and are uncomfortable and want to complain about something, don’t do it by yourself.”

Another common violation of the National Labor Relations Act is employers forbidding their employees from discussing their salaries, benefits, etc. with each other.

“That’s black letter law a violation,” Cass said. “I’m amazed at how many employers still pull that.”

Kate Dias is the president of the Connecticut Education Association, which advocates for legislation at the state and federal levels. Davis, also a Manchester High School teacher and an employer, said she sees both sides of organized labor.

“What I have discovered about unionism is that it is not about being at odds with my employer, but about building a collaborative environment in which we all win,” Dias said, adding that the perception that unions exist to make their employers miserable, is not the “name of the game.”

Teachers, Dias said, are still fighting against the lingering notion that most are women and therefore the secondary income-earners in their households, and don’t need to be paid as much as men.

“We are still feeling that impact,” she said. “When we look at wages across the state for teachers and educators, and the starting salaries.... with masters degrees, of \$54,000 a year, that is a historical progression of second-class earners that has been perpetuated over time.”

Pedro Zayas, senior communications advisor for the New England Health Care Employees Union, SEIU 1199NE, said the suffering that healthcare workers have seen in the past few years has been difficult to deal with. Throw in staffing shortages and facilities that cut corners, and the recipe is ripe for needing organization.

“Healthcare professionals do not want to cut corners,” Zayas said. “We do not want to figure out how to do better with less. If it’s possible, sure, but if it’s a profit-making approach, there’s probably a problem.”

Zayas said the 1199 fights for fair labor conditions for all healthcare workers, to improve safety in the workplace, and above all, human dignity for both patients and workers. However, its members are often undervalued, due to the high percentage of women and people of color.

“Currently, in Connecticut, nursing homes are working under extremely short-staffed conditions - deadly short-staffed conditions like we saw in the pandemic - and this is taking a huge toll on the health of these workers,” Zayas said. “Obviously, it doesn’t serve the patients and their families well.”

The GMLKCI is gearing up for another community conversation in January, which will coincide with a celebration of King, on Jan. 15.

For more information, visit www.glastonburymkci.org.