

Access 98% of Austin  
Rental Units \$295 & Up.



Austin American-Statesman  
**statesman.com**

 PRINT THIS

## At churches, advocates to speak up for workers

### Religious leaders, worker rights advocates joining forces in pulpits

By Eileen E. Flynn  
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF  
Monday, August 30, 2004

Drawing from a scriptural call to defend the poor, several Central Texas churches are teaming up with labor organizations to launch a social justice campaign to protect the dignity of low-wage workers.

Union leaders and worker rights advocates will begin, fittingly, on Labor Day weekend, using the pulpits to urge the faithful to action.

The Religion and Labor Network of Austin, a nonprofit group formed in May, is coordinating the speakers as part of an ongoing effort to link faith leaders and labor advocates. Labor in the Pulpits is an initiative created in 1996 by the Chicago-based National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice and the AFL-CIO. Last year, more than 100 cities participated.

"There's a long tradition of faith and labor cooperation on initiatives that support workers," said Karla Johnston-Krase, the network coordinator. "Really, we're just trying to rekindle that relationship and renew it."

Low-wage workers in Austin and other parts of Texas often face difficulties in demanding benefits, overtime pay and adequate working conditions, Johnston-Krase said. Immigrants sometimes don't even receive pay for their work.

Raising awareness is key, said Bill Beardall, executive director of the Equal Justice Center, an Austin nonprofit group that advocates for the rights of low-income workers and provides the staff for the Religion and Labor Network. He cited cases in which immigrant laborers were hired for temporary work, and, when they completed the job, the employer refused to pay them. Many immigrants are afraid or don't know how to hold employers accountable.

"That part of the working community is oddly very visible in some ways," Beardall said. "Everyone driving around town will note that there are informal day-labor hiring corners where working people, many of them immigrants, gather, looking for day labor or other low-wage hiring opportunities. And yet, what happens to them on those jobs is largely invisible and unknown to the public who otherwise sees them every day. One of the realities is that it is a shockingly common occurrence that they don't get paid for their work."

Louis Malfaro, president of the Austin Central Labor Council, the umbrella organization of all Central Texas unions affiliated with the AFL-CIO, said organizers will also speak about the need to support organized workers who, like immigrants, "are looking for a fair shake on the job."

Religious leaders can use their voices to draw attention to those concerns, he said.

"These are people who have a certain stature in the community," Malfaro said. "Their voices are listened to; their voices are respected."

**Find  
A  
Job!**

Building bridges between faith and labor is a theological fit, said the Rev. Karl Gronberg, pastor of Gethsemane Lutheran Church in North Austin, which will hear from a union worker at both Sunday services.

"We must be connected with one another because we believe in faith that God's concern for the poor is crucial to our understanding of Jesus," he said. "That is, if we're going to be the people of God, it's important we talk about dignity. . . . If anybody is suffering and not being paid for their efforts, we're all diminished."

eflynn@statesman.com; 445-3812

---

**Find this article at:**

[http://www.statesman.com/metrostate/content/auto/epaper/editions/monday/metro\\_state\\_14231d3381976092007e.html](http://www.statesman.com/metrostate/content/auto/epaper/editions/monday/metro_state_14231d3381976092007e.html)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

