

The Boston Labor Guild Still Stands Strong

By Rosemary Pye

Sometimes the timing is just right. On May 3, the last day of the Annual Conference, the National Academy of Arbitrators premiered *The Boston Labor Guild Still Stands Strong*. This 45-minute film, produced by the Video History Project of the College of Labor and Employment Lawyers with funding from the Academy's Research and Education Foundation, is about the Boston Labor Guild. The Guild was founded in 1946 by the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. The film recounts the origins of labor schools but also focuses on what the Guild is doing now to remain relevant for workers. The goal of the film is to provide history and to demonstrate how other communities could replicate this very successful model.

Ten days after the premiere, on May 13, the Catholic Church announced the selection of the first American pope, Pope Leo XIV. It is auspicious that by the selection of that name, the new Pope chose to honor and follow in the footsteps of Pope Leo XIII, a Pope well known for having published the Vatican Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things) in 1891. Pope Leo XIII recognized the social inequalities for workers moving from rural farms to urban factories and cities and affirmed the obligation of the Church to address the resulting social problems.

Forty years later, Pope Pius XI wrote *Quadragesimo Anno*, a 40-year assessment of *Rerum Novarum*, directing that all levels of the Catholic Church needed to be engaged in the world's industrial economy and urging workers to form trade associations and

discussion groups. It is heartening that the new Pope was immediately drawn to the heroes of the labor movement.

The Guild was founded in 1945, following World War II and the passage of the Wagner Act, by Archbishop Cushing of Boston, the son of a union worker. Its charter, following the spirit of the Encyclicals, states, “The Guild promotes justice and good order in area workplaces by inspiring, motivating, and helping men and women to act with conscience, know-how, and courage in labor-management relations.”

When it was founded, the Guild was part of a vibrant, nation-wide movement of over 150 labor schools sponsored by the Catholic Church and open to everyone. During this same era, Jewish Worker Circles were engaged in the same training and support of workers. They, too, based their mission on the earliest teachings of the Old Testament.

Over time, the schools were absorbed by universities or just disappeared. The Boston Guild is the only one left, and this video shows how the Guild has remained healthy.

As the video illustrates, the Guild’s focus is on training workers and union and management leadership in the full range of skills to promote effective labor-management relations. Among the Guild classes available are parliamentary procedure for union meetings, serving as a steward, deciding when a grievance is appropriate, negotiating a collective-bargaining agreement, drafting contract language, building coalitions, learning labor law and labor arbitration, and studying safety protections. More recent topics include addressing drug and alcohol addiction, human trafficking, and domestic violence. The curriculum responds to student interest, and a recent addition to the curriculum is digital marketing.

The video shows interviews of the volunteer faculty and of worker students. Many of the faculty have taught there for decades. As one faculty member explained, the Wagner Act (the National Labor Relations Act) depends on having knowledgeable people on both sides of the bargaining table. The faculty are gratified to contribute to the labor movement by providing training the students “so desperately need.”

The students tell of learning to act constructively in running a fair union meeting where everyone is heard, acting responsibly to solve problems with management, drafting clear contract language, and educating the membership about labor history to put today’s issues in context. It is impressive to see the students so clearly articulate what the faculty has taught them. The word students use most often is “empowered.”

As one faculty member said, there is no place where you can get a more affordable education in labor relations.

Recently, NAA Members Sheila Mayberry and Liz Neumeier taught a six-week, 12-hour course on arbitration for \$75. Prior to the pandemic, the classes were in person. Since the pandemic, classes have been on Zoom, which has expanded the student body to workers from across the United States and around the world. Soon, classes will be recorded to allow students to access the materials on their own schedule. While most of the students are union-side, there are also students from management and neutrals.

The Boston Labor Guild Still Stands Strong is another in the line of College of Labor and Employment Lawyer, Video History Project (John Higgins, Chief Honcho) films funded by the National Academy of Arbitrators Research and Education Fund

including: *The George Mitchell Interview*; *The Memphis Sanitation Strike: Its Place in Labor History*; and *The Art and Science of Arbitration*. Those films, as well as filmed interviews of leaders in the field of labor relations, are available on the College website under the Video History Project. A link to the video is also available on the Boston Labor Guild web site: [Boston Labor Guild.com](http://BostonLaborGuild.com) [access to video pops up on the left side of the screen: "Now Streaming."] Please spread the word to those who are interested in exploring an inexpensive and practical learning experience including workers and managers.