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Mormonism, Work, and Labor Relations

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This article highlights core beliefs

about labor and unemployment that are held by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), popularly referred to as the Mormons. These beliefs combine concepts and practices of religious teachings from the pioneer Church of the mid-1800s with generations of Mormon temporal ideals. Most are still widely held in Utah, a state where approximately two-thirds of the population is LDS.¹ What follows is an examination of basic LDS values on work, full employment, management and leadership, labor relations, equality, and worker ownership. In addition to discussing Mormonism's ideals, weaknesses in practice are also briefly mentioned.

Work and Jobs for All

LDS employees are generally recognized for possessing a strong work ethic. Starting with the Church's founding Prophet, Joseph Smith, its leaders have advocated the need to fulfill the Biblical injunction to labor by "the sweat of thy face" (Genesis 3:19). In the nearly two centuries of Mormonism, its top officials have stressed the dignity of labor and advocated that industriousness leads to self-respect and independence. Thus, work plays a central role in Mormon life. Central principles of Mormonism include securing employment to support one's

family, and being productive in the use of one's time.

In spite of work's importance, the rewards received in exchange for one's labor are not always great in firms owned or managed by Mormons. Utah has one of the lowest pay levels of any state.² As this article being written (June 2008), Utah's minimum wage is a mere \$5.85, and efforts to boost compensation by enacting living-wage legislation have been unsuccessful.

³ On the other hand, Utah's annual rate of economic growth is typically among the highest in the country.⁴ The state's pay and growth trends may reflect LDS views toward unions and entrepreneurship more than the Church's view toward work, as will become evident in the discussion below.

Brigham Young, successor to Smith and pioneer colonizer of many western U.S. cities, stressed the need for full employment. He and his associates preached that people are poor because of lack of opportunity, and that the Church and larger society should establish job-creation programs and foster employment opportunities.

This may be a reason why Utah, with its large concentration of Mormons, is frequently ranked high in national business publications for its rate of entrepreneurial startups. For example, the *Inc. 500* lists Utah as having double the next-highest rate of companies per capita, including such firms as

Novell, Sorenson Medical, Iomega, and Huntsman Chemical.⁵ These firms have been created despite the fact that there has long been a dearth of start-up capital in the state for budding entrepreneurs, though this situation is beginning to improve.

Mormons possess optimism and a can-do spirit, traceable to their pioneer roots and conception of work, and many feel they have a religious duty to create employment for others. Excluding Hawaii, the state enjoyed the nation's smallest unemployment rate during 2007—a mere 2.7 percent. More

recently, the U.S. unemployment rate was 5.0 in April 2008, while unemployment in Utah was 3.1 percent (the third-lowest rate among the states).⁶

Management and Labor Relations

Joseph Smith had a management philosophy based on the notion of teaching people principles they could use to govern themselves. In early pioneer businesses, management positions were filled by a vote of the workers. Righteous or principle-based leadership was seen as the appropriate approach.

Throughout Mormon history, the potential for abuse of management authority has been clearly recognized. Like other democratic idealists of the 1800s, Smith taught that power can corrupt and that nearly all leaders tend to dominate followers. The prime motive for moral leaders ought to instead emerge from love and humility. In today's vernacular, stewardship is the ethical basis for managers' organizational influence.

U.S. industrial history is replete with conflicts between trade unions and company bosses.

Robber Barons often exploited the labor force by tolerating, or even insisting upon, long workdays, dangerous jobs, filthy conditions, child labor, aggressive union-busting tactics, and workplace violence.

Mormon ideology advocated different values. The working class was to be honored and conflict was discouraged. The new organizational models Mormons sought were ones of worker-manager collaboration.

Pioneer apostles advocated the need for Utahans to avoid industrial warfare. Owners of capital were to not oppress, but to include employees in decision-making. On the other side, workers were to learn finance so as to understand how productivity and profits were generated in order for improvements to be made through collaborative relations. Mormon industrial relations integrated the interests of

labor with the objectives of capital.

As Mormonism entered the 20th Century, however, church leaders began to take a dim view of unions. While LDS members were never told not to unionize, criticism of closed shops was prevalent, and in the 1950s Utah became one of the few states outside the South to enact Right to Work legislation. Since then, labor unions in the region have typically been small and weak, although there are exceptions, especially in the public sector and healthcare. There have been only a handful of practicing Latter-day Saints who became union officials. Ed Mayne, head of the state AFL-CIO until his death in late 2007, held his post for three decades (and served simultaneously in the State Senate). Most LDS union leaders have been found in white-collar labor organizations like the Utah Education Association and the American Nurses Association. While Mormons are somewhat overrepresented in U.S. politics and business leadership, there have been no significant national Mormon labor leaders over the years.

Equality and Worker Ownership

Brigham Young condemned social and economic inequality. He and his successors were concerned about the growing gap between the “haves” and “havenots,” warning that if concentrations of wealth and power by elites were not reversed, societal upheaval would wreck the dreams of a more just world. Mormon theology declared that its members would never become the people of God without eliminating class distinctions that typify the socio-economic gulf between rich and poor.

As a result of these Mormon egalitarian values, various studies in recent years report Utah’s levels of inequality to be among the lowest of any state. Its Gini coefficient, an index of inequality where 0 represents complete equality and 1 represents complete inequality, tends to average approximately 0.410, in contrast to states with the highest ratios of inequality like New York (0.495) and Connecticut (0.480). This has been the pattern since the 1850s Mormon pioneer era, a likely reflection

of LDS economic precepts.⁷ Rather than have a bifurcated economic system characterized by labor-management differences, LDS apostles consistently encouraged Church members to collaborate. The aim was for members to build industries that would be their own, rather than to become mere laborers employed by rich industrialists. The goal was to develop cooperation, unity, and a sharing of profits. Ultimately, their vision was that of building a “United Order,” an alternative economic system to mainstream capitalism. Thus, Mormon pioneers labored to design and launch hundreds of worker-owned cooperatives around the Intermountain West. Perhaps the best known was Zions Cooperative Mercantile Institution, the nation’s first department store. While many of these co-ops did not survive because of outside persecution, fires, floods, and the growing capitalism that separated workers from ownership, their legacy still remains today. In the 1930s, pioneer descendants established the Moroni Feed Cooperative in Utah, a collective enterprise that currently employs 800 workers and produces 5 million turkeys and a \$10 million payroll annually.⁸ Some descendants of LDS pioneer leaders have taken a newer route to practicing their Mormon economic ideals. One of these is Louis Pope, whose firm, U.S. Synthetic, produces industrial diamonds for drill bits used in gas and oil exploration. U.S. Synthetic has an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP), which gives stock and other benefits to the firm’s 250 workers. Yet Utah does not have a coherent strategy for promoting ESOPs. When compared with progressive programs like those in Ohio, Minnesota, California, or even tiny Vermont, it is apparent that pioneer visions of worker and community ownership have yet to be attained.

What Would the Founders Say?

The above themes briefly highlight Mormon perspectives on work. Some attention has also been given to work related practices in Utah, the state in which the LDS are most concentrated.

It is impossible to know whether Joseph Smith, Brigham Young and other LDS founders would be pleased with today's system of labor relations in Utah and beyond, but it is likely that they would agree that current practices fall short of perfection. Certainly more should be done if the region is to adhere fully to Mormonism's pioneer values regarding business and economics.

NOTES

1. Just a few decades ago, more than three out of four residents of the state were Mormons. See "The Shrinking Majority," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, July 24, 2005, A10.
2. See, for example, the federal data series (now discontinued) <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/annpay.t02.htm>. Accessed June 21, 2008. (All other Internet sources cited in this article were accessed on the same date unless otherwise noted.)
3. In mid-July 2008, Utah's state minimum wage increases to \$6.55, a change compatible with federal law. In contrast, 22 states and the District of Columbia will have higher minimum wages. For wage rates, see: <http://www.laborlawcenter.com/state-Minimum-Wage-rates.asp>. It is also worth noting that, compared to other states, Utah typically ranks 45th or below in terms of per capita income (\$29,406 in 2006). See U.S. Department of Commerce income data by state: <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0104652.html>.
4. For example, according to percent change in gross state product, Utah was the fifth fastest-growing state between 2004 and 2005. For a chart of state growth rates using U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis data, see: http://www.statemaster.com/graph/eco_eco_gro-economy-economic-growth.
5. For the *Inc. 500*—and *Inc. 5000*, see <http://www.inc.com/inc5000>.
6. For unemployment data cited above, see <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/srgune.nr0.htm>, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm>, and http://money.cnn.com/pf/features/lists/state_unemployment/.
7. See the *Economic Policy Institute and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities Report*: "State Income Inequality Continued to Grow in Most States in the 1990s" <http://www.cbpp.org/1-18-00sfp.htm> (Washington, DC, January

2000).

8. For references supporting worker ownership and other Mormon issues about work and industry, see James W. Lucas and Warner P. Woodworth, *Working Toward Zion: Principles of the United Order for the Modern World* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1999).

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