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## Going Hungry to Make a Point; A Fast for Poor Laborers Is a Sign of New Interest in an Old Technique

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE (NYT) 1418 words

On college campuses and farmers' fields, in churches and immigration detention centers, and across a range of religious and political beliefs, people are fasting. They do it to make a statement, to prove a point, to draw attention, to make a personal kind of peace.

Indeed, across New York State this week, more than a thousand people, from the Roman Catholic bishop of Albany to janitors in Buffalo, have joined one of the country's largest fasts, this one to protest low wages and abuses in the workplace.

Fasting, of course, has been a spiritual undertaking and sociopolitical tool for centuries, and the lineup of famous fasters is vast and varied: Gandhi, Cesar Chavez, Dick Gregory and, of course, Jesus of Nazareth. But fasting, it appears, is seeing a modest revival.

"There's been a definite increase in fasting," said Kim Bobo, executive director of the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice. "Fasting has always been in the Christian, Jewish and Muslim tradition, and as people of faith seek increasingly to struggle for justice in this time of abundance, it's a natural outgrowth that fasting would be something they do."

To many, the power of fasting, personal and political, feels especially strong in New York, where many of the streets, beginning with Wall Street and extending deep into the suburbs, seem to be awash in money and an obsession with wealth and excess.

Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany said New York's religious and labor leaders came up with the idea of a 40-hour fast because they were upset that the problems of poor workers were drawing so little attention, while high-tech billionaires were getting all the publicity. Fasting, he said, is a way to make an unmistakable moral statement when so much of the populace is preoccupied with stock options and sybaritic consumerism. And what better time to do it, he said, than during the Christian penitential season of Lent?

"Everybody is mesmerized these days by the soaring stock market and how people seem to be doing so well economically, yet the gap between the richest and the poorest is wider than it's been in decades," said Bishop Hubbard, co-chairman of the New York State Labor-Religion Coalition, which organized the fast. "Very often those not participating cannot speak for themselves, and we feel as religious leaders and members of the labor movement that we have to be a voice for the voiceless."

In Albany, Brockport, Buffalo, Rochester, Syracuse and New York City, hundreds of clergy members, labor leaders, college students and others began fasting at 8 p.m. Wednesday. Subsisting on only water and juice, they have prayed together and joined street demonstrations to draw attention to a group they call "invisible workers."

These workers include janitors in Buffalo who earn \$5.25 an hour, farm workers in Sullivan County who are required to work 70 hours a week and cafeteria workers at the State University of New York in Albany who cannot afford medical coverage. These workers, the fasters say, often do not earn enough to feed their families adequately.

Hallie Williams of Buffalo, who worked for 18 years as a unionized building cleaner before she was laid off and replaced by a nonunion janitor earning the minimum wage, applauded the fast. "We can't do

anything if somebody don't help us because if somebody don't help us, we're just out there without a paddle," she said.

The New Yorkers are fasting during the same week that six students at Purdue University in Indiana are doing so to pressure the university's administration to do more to ensure that clothing bearing the Purdue name is not made in sweatshops.

Last spring, six students at the University of California at Berkeley fasted for eight days to demand more instructors for the ethnic studies department. In 1998, half a dozen tomato pickers in Immokalee, Fla., fasted for a month to protest low wages, while janitors and labor leaders at the University of Southern California shunned food to protest the university's failure to sign a union contract.

Fouad Jabar, a graduate student at Purdue who began fasting on Monday, said, "At other schools, there have been sit-ins and protest demonstrations, but instead of being confrontational, we chose to do a fast to show how serious we are about the sweatshop problem."

The Rev. Kevin Irwin, a professor of theology at the Catholic University of America who has written extensively on fasting, said the recent upsurge is a healthy development, healthier than a trendier type of fasting that he has little patience for.

"The recent trend in fasting in our society was rather narcissistic -- we fast to lose weight, we fast to look good," Father Irwin said. "The purpose of the fasting we're seeing now regarding social concerns is healthier. It is dependent on God and raises very important values in society."

Those who choose to fast have many role models. In the Bible, the prophet Isaiah fasted to loose the bonds of wickedness and to undo the yoke of the oppressed, and Jesus fasted for 40 days to proclaim good news to the poor and to give sight to the blind and health to the sick.

Gandhi fasted to draw attention to Britain's colonial domination and harsh treatment of the Indian people. Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers, held repeated fasts of three weeks or more to make the public focus on the low wages and miserable conditions of thousands of farm workers.

"It's a commonly accepted practice: one afflicts one's own body as a sign of identifying with the pain of another," said Balfour Brickner, rabbi emeritus at the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue in Manhattan. "The fast in New York is appropriate because these people, these workers, are hungry. They're hungering for economic and social justice, and our fast is a manifestation of our identity with their cause."

Brian O'Shaughnessy, statewide coordinator of New York's labor-religion coalition, acknowledged that it was hard to count how many people were participating in the fast. But he said close to 1,500 people had told the coalition that they would participate.

The coalition chose to make the fast 40 hours because 40 is freighted with symbolism: the 40 days of Lent, the 40 days of rain in the Great Flood, the Jews' 40 years in the desert, and the 40-hour workweek.

This is the fifth year the coalition has held the fast. Last year, after the participants focused on the plight of farm workers, the State Legislature raised the minimum wage for farm workers. This year the fast began two days after the New York State Catholic Conference held its annual lobbying day in Albany, and it will end at noon today.

"Fasts like this highlight problems and highlight the need for us to continue to address the inequities in many provisions of the labor law," said Nicholas Spano, a Westchester County Republican who is chairman of the State Senate Labor Committee. "We are listening, we are responding, and we have to do more."

The participants say they want to press the Legislature to raise the state minimum wage above the federal minimum of \$5.15.

Bishop Hubbard said he hoped the fast would grow in future years, and some labor and religious leaders say they will try to spread it to other states. The fasters, Bishop Hubbard said, were following in the footsteps of Jesus, who, the Bible said, fasted to prepare for his public ministry to help the needy.

"I think we have the same mission in today's society," he said. "The issues may be different, but the call to reach out to those who are neediest and most vulnerable among us is every bit as much a part of our religious mandate as it was when Christ walked the face of the earth."

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