

Los Angeles Times

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 7, 2006

OPINION

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What would Jesus negotiate?

• *Unions fight to work at the megachurch-owned Forum*

THE PICKET people are gone. That's what I called the small band of union foot soldiers who walked the line outside the Forum every day, protesting that they've been locked out of the Inglewood landmark for about two months.

The Forum is but one of several places where these folks work. The picket people belong to Local 33 of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, the stagehand union that staffs many a Hollywood set and helps mount many a traveling show. And the union has been setting up shows at the Forum since it opened in 1967, more than long enough to have established a tradition in Los Angeles.

But like so many L.A. traditions, this one was unceremoniously broken in April when SMG, the Forum's management company, basically jettisoned the union contract that the local had been struggling to renegotiate since last year. Given the steady decline of unions over the last generation, and the fact that SMG is a global corporate powerhouse, this isn't a surprising development.

What is surprising is that SMG manages the Forum for Faithful Central Bible Church, the predominantly black, Inglewood-based megachurch that bought the Forum in 2000 as part of an ambitious venture meant to enrich the church and improve the economic fortunes of middle- and working-class

Inglewood. So far at least, Inglewood's on the losing end of the deal.

But the union didn't make too much noise about the rough treatment by SMG, even after the company scaled back crews, offered the union a paltry contract and then, after claiming union members were engaging in a work slowdown, locked them out. Union officials, for their part, were concerned about keeping members working and were more than a little uneasy about protesting on church property — how would that look in a churchgoing community?

It was the church, ironically but appropriately, that settled the question of moral authority. After first saying it was neutral in the labor dispute (“neutral” hardly seems a position Jesus would recommend), Faithful Central provided church buses for scab workers brought in by SMG. The picket people got bolder, passing out fliers with photos of the incriminating buses.

Then Bishop Kenneth C. Ulmer, the pastor of Faithful Central, promised to meet with the union if it promised not to walk the pavement on Easter Sunday, traditionally one of Faithful Central's best-attended services of the year. The union, which had routinely worked church events and maintained a good relationship with the church until the contract impasse, held up its end of the bargain. The church did not.

Union discontent culminated in a full-out demonstration at the Madonna

concert on May 24. The picket people came out of the shadows wearing brilliant neon-green T-shirts and wielding bullhorns and signs.

Among those who turned out was Dan Nelson, who's worked at the Forum for all 39 years of its existence. Nelson says his father was a construction coordinator for the building and is featured in an opening-day photo that hangs prominently in the Forum Club. “SMG did not do the right thing,” Nelson said. “We've done a lot of things to help the church. We're not against them, we're against management.”

Jonathan Hagstrand, 21, is a sound man who got into the stagehand business out of high school and says the Forum provides crucial entry-level employment for newcomers, especially newcomers of color, like him. (Hagstrand is Swedish and African American.) “This is a spot where you could get a foothold,” he said. “It's a cool job.” One of the many things the union offered as part of a new contract was a long-overdue community apprenticeship program. But it failed to move SMG or Faithful Central.

The union says the picket people will be back. They'll take up their posts again when another concert rolls into town and they have the chance to admonish their nonunion counterparts and raise public awareness on a regular basis. Unless, of course, the contract gets settled and working life resumes. That would be quite the performance.