

Why unions matter for everyone



BY ELAINE BERNARD

THE decline in strength, density and influence of the labor movement must be a concern for all of us — whether we are union members or not. It has led to stagnating and declining wages and benefits of workers, undermining the entire community.

So let's look a little closer at what unions do, for members, for employers and for the entire community.

When union workers talk about the benefit of their union, they think of a wide variety of rights, services and benefits that the union offers: job security, salary protection, paid vacation, the promotion of consistent and fair treatment; a voice in scheduling; recognition and a premium for overtime; a say in hiring and promotion; a united voice in dealing with the employer; an impartial process for resolving complaints; protection against unfair treatment; a role in setting and enforcing occupation health and safety standards, and collective power in standard setting and promotion of the profession or skill of employees.

Phew! All of this, plus what we usually focus on: the higher wages and benefits enjoyed by union members through collective bargaining.

Yet, beyond this list of benefits, a key benefit of unions is that they not only win rights for workers, but unions are also a vehicle through which workers are able to exercise their rights. Without such a vehicle, the many rights won through collective bargaining and legislation would be ignored by employers.

What we don't often talk about is what unions do for employers and management.

First and foremost, unions aggregate employee interests and foster a greater commitment of employees. This results in lower turnover rates in employment.

Unions give workers voice in the workplace, which is a feedback mechanism vital for the improvement of any system. Through collective bargaining, unions negotiate mutually agreed upon standards and thereby provide a flexible, private, system of workplace regulation.

Unions force employers to compete on factors other than wages, leading employers to seek other paths for competition, such as innovation, and higher skills. Unions assist employers in seeking this path, as they provide worker education and promote lifelong learning.

Unions are also vital institutions promoting democracy. They help workers understand they have rights and indeed a responsibility to participate in decisions that affect them. Unions provide a powerful check to the almost total power of management in the workplace.

Rights at work, including freedom of association and the freedom to form unions and bargain collectively, are the vital underpinnings of a democratic society.

Where, but through the union movement, do millions of American workers learn how to democratically combine, not with an exclusive community of their choosing, but with a workforce hired by an employer and molded into a community through union organizing?

But labor movements and other communities of common interest don't just happen. They must be consciously constructed with a lot of hard work, discussion and organization.

Crafting democratic communities in the workplace is an ongoing process, rather like democracy. And like democracy, it's a process that can be rolled back or reversed. So whether we continue to grow as a democracy and as unions is ultimately in our hands.

Elaine Bernard is a senior research associate at the Labor and Worklife Program, Harvard University Law School.

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