U.S. workers still benefit from union label

by Michael Kinsman

When I was first asked to join a union, I remember thinking that was the last thing I wanted to do.

But I actually wasn't asked to join, I was told to join. It was a stipulation of accepting the job.

That didn't sit well with me. I was young, energetic and ambitious about my future and I just couldn't see how being part of union would help me in pursuit of my career plans.

Several years passed and I learned the value of a union. I saw nonunion and union workplaces from the inside and outside, and found that unions often were a stabilizing factor in labor-management relations because they often helped steer everyone to the middle ground.

But I also recognized that unions had a severe image problem, one that nearly overshadowed their mission to help workers lead better lives.

Sadly, unions struggle with that today. They seem easy targets to criticize, they are blamed for increasing the cost of doing business, protecting bad workers from losing their jobs and being an obstacle to innovation and productivity.

Sometimes, those complaints are valid. Sometimes, they are misguided.

Union membership in the United States has been in sharp decline for the past three decades. Fifty years ago, unions represented about one in three American workers. Today, slightly more than 12 percent are union members.

Federal organizing laws have been undermined by government policies, employers have discouraged union organizing, and abuses of the right to have a union have been rampant in recent years without fear of reprisal.

The actions of the federal government and employers in recent years have made a mockery of the National Labor Relations Act, the 1935 law giving workers the right to organize into collective bargaining units and providing the basis for improving workers health, safety and benefits since then.

In early February, the Employee Free Choice Act was introduced in Congress. The legislation should not be necessary but it reaffirms and strengthens the nation's commitment to allow workers to organize unions in their workplaces, if they wish.

The provisions of the legislation are simple: It calls upon the National Labor Relations Board to clarify and safeguards union organizing if a majority of workers in a particular workplace agree to organize; it requires federal mediation 90 days after a union is certified if no contract agreement is reached and requires arbitration 30 days after that if there still is no contract; and, it carries stronger penalties for companies that violate the anti-organizing and intimidation provisions.

A recent poll by Peter D. Hart Research Associates shows that 68 percent of American workers believe unions can make a difference in their workplaces and 62 percent think their wages and benefits would suffer if there were no more unions.

Clearly, unions are fighting battles that represent more than 12.5 percent of the working population.

The truth is unions remain the best counterbalance to unchecked management rights in the United States.

Think of the way the federal government is structured. It doesn't give power to any one entity. The government's power structure is divvied up between the executive, judicial and legislative branches.

However perplexing these entities can be at times, I would wager that nearly all Americans agree that this system of checks and balances is one of the more magnificent creations in the modern world.

That's because laws that emerge from this structure represent the values of the citizenry and the intent of our forefathers.

Unions and the collective-bargaining processes might at times be frustrating, but they are an essential component of the American workplace.

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