



Labor unions: Combating self-centeredness

In recent years, there's been a lot of talk about the decline of the labor movement by both supporters and critics. Certainly the numbers don't look good, as the unionized percentage of American workers has declined substantially over the last few decades.

Today, however, there are signs of a resurgence, especially in the public sector and among service workers. Of course, whether the labor movement will regain the influence and power it had in the decades immediately following World War II remains to be seen.

That it's important that it does is, I believe, irrefutable.

The major argument for—and against—unions is that unions raise wages and benefits, and protect workers from autocratic management intent on pushing them beyond their physical and mental capacities while ignoring workplace safety.

So it's for the economic benefits and workplace protections that workers join unions. It's for these very same reasons that employers fight to keep unions out of their workplaces.

But it's not only because of economic benefits and the need for justice on the job that unions are important. There's another reason—one often overlooked, but especially important today when American society has increasingly become more individualistic and self-centered.

Labor unions bring men and women together face to face, shoulder to shoulder, regardless of race, religion, political ideology, age or education, and ask them to work together, to seek common goals, to resolve problems, and to transcend their own concerns on behalf of each other and the larger society. And by larger society, I mean the poor, the unemployed, the afflicted, the aged and infirm.

Which is why letter carriers collect food for the hungry, holiday toys, coats and mittens for needy children, money to combat muscular dystrophy and other diseases—and even lobby for health care reform for all, even though *we* have good health insurance.

Not enough organizations bring people of diverse backgrounds together to work together for both their own common goals and on behalf of the larger society.

The sad truth of the matter is that too many Americans live in small “micro-communities” of people who look just like *us*, work at jobs like *ours*, believe what we believe—and get their “news” from the same sources we do.

They also receive Internet rants from people like *us*—and then forward them to people like *us*. And if the creator of the rant is hate-filled and fact-empty, then those who forward these diatribes along either share the creator's views or don't take the time to examine the assumptions, check the facts (if there are any), and reconcile the arguments with the values they profess.

Sometimes the “system” does break down, as I occasionally receive Internet diatribes opposite to what I believe. These people hate unions, racial minorities, government and any kind of government regulation, oppose any form of health care reform, believe President Obama is a Muslim communist born outside the United States, *and* don't want to pay taxes—*any* taxes.

Of course, these same people send their kids to public schools, use the sidewalks, highways and airports, have their garbage collected and streets cleared of snow, use public parks, receive police and fire protection and workplace safety and food and drug protections, and, in emergencies, federal assistance of all sorts. They are happy to receive—they just don't want to *pay* their fair share of what it costs to provide necessary services to all Americans.

The people who generate these digital broadsides often cloak their self-centeredness and greed in religious terms, as though religion endorses their greed and contempt for their fellow man. One thing that digital demagogues often don't do is to give their real names. They also don't give the sources of their hate-filled assertions, so their charges can ricochet around the Internet without being subject to close scrutiny and refutation.

These people also don't stand up at union meetings and argue their positions, trying to persuade others face-to-face of the validity of their views or subject their claims to an up-or-down vote. They just sit in front of their computers, ranting to like-minded, self-centered individuals.

We'd all benefit if they'd turn off their computers and go down to a union hall to help collect food for the needy, money to combat muscular dystrophy and toys and clothing for children whose parents have lost their jobs. Since this isn't likely to happen very soon, my only choice is to hit the “delete” button or answer each with a counter-rant.

And support the American labor movement, as it works tirelessly on behalf of *all* Americans. ☒