

UNIONS

By

Thomas R. Cuba, 2008

I remember the history lessons from school when we learned about the origin of the Unions as a concept. Of course, the situation was unacceptable. Owners really were taking advantage of people who were literally starving. During the depression working for next to nothing was a lot better than not working at all.

But it was wrong and the people rose up and figured out how to deal with it. Well one way, anyway. So Unions were deemed “good” by the society police.

I also remember that one of the arguments at the time was that Unions would just be a back door into socialism because the people, the proletariat, would have a fixed wage and blah blah. It was pretty empty.

The company where my Dad worked was non union and each year the management met with the staff and they worked out a deal and went forward. Never had any strife in 15 years. Then the shop unionized and they were on strike in two weeks. The most skilled of the employees left. Why? Because by the time this happened this particular Union was no longer interested in fair treatment, it was interested in taking as much from management as it possibly could take. A few years later, management gave up and sold the company.

What has happened since then?

I believe things have gotten a little out of control. I know a firefighter for example who can't transfer from one County to the next because he is in the wrong Union. To qualify for the job, he would have to go get a new training certificate. Yep, the certification is given by the Union and they charge “new applicants” a huge fee to attend the class and get certified. Yep, even “new” applicants with 15 years of experience in another firefighter's union.

Today we also have Players' Unions for football professionals. Think about this. A Union for “employees” making a couple million dollars a season.

So, the quandary is that Unions are necessary to some extent, but also seem to be just a little too big. A few years ago it was reported that most workers in Alaska all belonged to the same union. It didn't matter what job it was, they were all in the same union. This report shaped a fair amount of my opinion in this matter.

I wondered, why would a baker be in the same union as a plumber? The purpose of the Union was to provide the power of collective negotiations, right? Who are these two folks, the baker and the plumber, “collectively negotiating” with? That's an important question.

And so, for the moment, the apparent solution to the conundrum is to refocus unions on their original mission.

Balancing that - and using unions as an example because we have been talking about them - I believe in unions, but on a company by company basis and skill by skill basis. So, Ford wrench turners would be in a different union from Ford paint and body guys and from Chevy wrench turners. Why? For the same reasons I oppose mega corporations. Labor is a commodity. In collective bargaining it is traded as such by the negotiators. Right now, unions have a monopoly on the labor supply. But like a commodity, apples are apples and oranges are oranges and they are, and should be, traded separately. Having a labor force with numerous unions would invoke another of my cornerstone beliefs: Competition. Let these traders compete for the salary dollar that owners are willing to pay.

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