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Walking the Line

In the fall of my junior year of high school, unionized teachers in my school district went on strike to gain better health care benefits and an increase in the pay scale for those with advanced degrees and experience. Perhaps a hundred students at my high school sat out on the front lawn in a show of solidarity, and we were, as a result, locked out. It being the late 1960s, we sang folk songs and freedom songs until surrounded by police and told to come inside after signing a list with our names and home phone numbers.

I returned to my math class, where the teacher heatedly and publicly informed me that the union strike was none of my business. Over the course of the day we were called in one at a time to the school's disciplinarian, a former Olympic gymnast known for his Marine-like treatment of the team he coached and any students unfortunate enough to be sent to his office. My turn came, and his first words were that he was unable to reach my mother to tell her of the awful thing I had done. Of course not, I replied, she is out on the picket line at the junior high where she teaches. So much for it being none of my business, as well.

That was my first experience with unions and those on both sides of the picket line. I well knew that what happened to teachers would affect me in a very direct way, from the amount of food on our table to the ability to go to the doctor when I annually contracted bronchitis from playing field hockey. The old saw about teachers only working short hours and no summers was also mythical to me, seeing my mother often work until 2 A.M., and spend her summers reviewing new text books and writing new lesson

plans to incorporate them. Yes, the union was definitely a family thing.

My next union experience was unexpected and violent. Surveying in Philadelphia, the company I worked for had been hired to check the levelness of the seams between concrete slabs comprising the runways, for safety reasons. Arriving on site in our VW Microbus (perfect for tight center city parking and easy to load with equipment), we were surrounded by a shouting, snarling mob of unionized airport workers on the tarmac, and suddenly there was a brick through our windshield. We left immediately, and I still don't quite understand all the details of what happened in those few short minutes. The union folks were not surveyors, and we were not in their line of work. The event left a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I understood that the strikers had families just like mine, and that they wanted to care for and support their families just as my mother had wanted to do for hers. But I didn't understand the physical threats.

It isn't easy going on a picket line. My mother had anguished over it for

weeks before the strike began, and we carefully reviewed the American Federation of Teachers' stance versus the National Education Association's stance, then compared each to what the school district offered for the contract renewal. But I don't recall physical endangerment being part of the mix.

Certainly unions have served a much-needed purpose in this nation, protecting workers from the abuse of faceless corporations more interested in paying dividends to stockholders than assuring that the workers who made those dividends possible had safe working conditions and a living wage. Perhaps in the early days, violence was the only way to get the attention necessary to prove that the unions were serious about their demands. A worker could die enmeshed in the gears of the machine he operated for twelve hours a day, six days a week, or he could die on the picket line when the factory owner decided to solve the problem differently.

Unions are becoming more aggressive as they lose members. In some cases it appears that their demands border

continued on page 71



Lathrop, continued from page 72

on “featherbedding”, unnecessary requirements to maximize the number of workers on a job and the pay they receive—although it should be remembered that “featherbedding” originated with railroad unions to assure that there was a fresh worker on hand when long exhausting shifts threatened the safety of a crew in emergencies. Yes, it is a good thing to require employers to pay a living wage, and to recognize that a living wage varies across the country. No, it is not a good thing to threaten those who wish to pack and move their own fragile antiques in exhibition halls. I didn’t understand that one either, when I had thought the union folks were there to help us set up and break down, rather than take over without understanding the care and feeding of the objects being handled.

The main point of all this is twofold. The first part is treating each other as we would wish to be treated. This translates into employers offering reasonable working conditions, reasonable salaries, reasonable opportunity to advance. And employees must invest reasonable effort into doing their work well, into being reliable and responsible, into improving their skills. I’m sure that the term “reasonable” is the sticky part for many. What is reasonable to one person is not always so for another. Employees may not understand that some requests can run the employer into the red. Employers may forget that it takes a bigger chunk of a paycheck to buy a home or finance an education than it used to.

This is where the second part comes into play: good communication. There are two aspects to communication, as well: listening and speaking. Sometimes they come in just that order, too. It is hard to hear someone’s concerns while monopolizing the interaction. It isn’t always possible to get in both the first and the last word unless there isn’t really a conversation occurring.

It isn’t about “the boss” having all the control or the employee hauling “the boss” over a barrel. Instead, it is about listening and responding appropriately. It is about following up on promises. It is about being proactive to best serve employer and employee simultaneously rather than waiting for a situation to get so out of hand that emotions run too high to resolve it objectively. It is about treating each other as humans with common needs and concerns. It is about trust earned and kept on both sides of the paycheck. 