

Which Side Are You On? Choosing Compassion in the Workplace

Happy Labor Day? Doesn't sound quite right, does it? Labor Day has always seemed to me a day in search of a meaning. Sure, it's a great to end the summer and the start a new school year with a long weekend. And family get-togethers, barbeques, and a last chance for the beach are welcome any time of year. But what does the day have to do with labor?

Google Labor Day and you'll likely find a story that goes something like this: The first parade to mark the success of organized labor was held by the in New York City in September 1882. In subsequent years, other unions held similar commemorative parades, usually in September, and the trend spread across the US. Some states made it a holiday and, finally, in 1894 Congress proclaimed the first national Labor Day. But this isn't much of a history. And by the way, why is May 1 — International Labor Day — a big deal in many other countries, but not here in the U.S.?

The back story, the real story of Labor Day, like other bits of history, is more complicated and even rather unsavory. It starts on May 1, 1884, at the convention of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions—predecessor of the AFL. The convention marked the start of a two-year campaign to establish an 8-hour workday as standard. Predictably, at the end of the two years many employers still did not have an 8-hour day, and on May 1, 1886, unions held massive marches in cities throughout the United States. The largest of these was in Chicago where, a few days later, at a poorly organized mass meeting to protest police violence against labor unionists, 200 policemen descended on the crowd, someone threw a bomb,

and the resulting melee and show trial of labor leaders became a scandal of international proportions. The Haymarket Massacre or Riot, depending on your perspective, was commemorated by the First (Paris) Congress of the Second Socialist International in 1889, which declared May 1 International Labor Day.

So that explains May Day, but how then did the United States end up with Labor Day in September? An economic panic in 1893 — as severe in its time as our current crisis — hit the Illinois Pullman Palace Car Company hard. George Pullman, the company's owner, responded by cutting workers' wages, but not the rents they paid in company-owned housing. The plant's workers struck when he refused to even talk to them about it, and sympathetic railroad workers, led by Eugene Debs, followed. The crippling strike, involving an estimated 250,000 workers at its peak, was brutally suppressed by US Marshalls and 12,000 US Army soldiers sent by President Grover Cleveland. The next year, the US Congress proclaimed the first Monday in September Labor Day. It was both a way to appease the labor movement while also neatly undercutting the status and meaning of International Labor Day. So here we are today with a holiday that is notable mostly for marking the end of summer.

I think one reason we tend to undervalue the role and usefulness of unions is because they acknowledge the weakness of the individual. They deny our illusion of self-sufficiency. But by working together in unions workers have helped build the American middle class. They have made life better for us all by helping to establish:

- a minimum wage,

- overtime pay,
- laws ending child labor,
- laws protecting workers' safety and health,
- precedents for health insurance and pensions,
- the creation of Social Security and Medicare,
- paid sick days, paid vacation days, unemployment insurance, worker's compensation.

Oh, and that 8-hour workday? It finally became the standard as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal legislation in the 1930s, along with the five-day work week. Yes, unions gave us the weekend.

In 2009, unionized workers made up just over 12 percent of the working population, down from 20 percent in 1983. Although they make up a relatively small proportion of the workforce, they have an outsize effect on salaries, benefits, and working conditions. For that we should be grateful, it is an achievement worthy of a holiday.

MUSICAL BREAK

Which Side Are You On

“Which side are you on, which side are you on?”

The song issues a challenge that makes us uneasy. We need to know which side we are on. We need to know where we belong. But how do we choose and how do we know we have chosen correctly?

The choice was clear for Florence Reese when she wrote that song following a raid on her home by company thugs searching for her husband, a union organizer. She was on the side of those who were trying to help others to a better life, she was most certainly not on the side of those who held their power with threats and intimidation.

The choice was also clear for Grace Clements in this morning's reading from Studs Terkel's *Working*, who discovered life in her work as a union representative in the luggage factory where she worked. Her thoughts in particular speak to me.

For most of the dozen years I have been at the World Bank I have been active in the Staff Association. It isn't a role I sought. In fact, I took it up rather reluctantly at the urging of some friends who thought I would serve them well as a representative. Over the years the role has grown on me, and I now take pride in this service. I find that it gives my workplace a more human feel to know the people around me, to be able to provide them with advice, counsel, and support in times of trouble. It isn't enough to just go to work, do your job, and go home again.

I suspect that, like me, most of you are or were employed in jobs that don't require manual labor and in most cases are not union jobs. But are we any less at risk than other workers? Do we still need the support of our work communities to protect ourselves against unfair employment practices?

A young woman came to me a few months ago with a story that has become too familiar. She had been hired as a short-term consultant to produce a

report by a particular date. She completed the work, sent it to the manager by the date required, and waited for the manager's reaction. Several weeks later, having heard nothing, she sent an email to the manager asking if she could submit her request for payment. The manager replied that she hadn't received the promised product by the deadline. The young woman forwarded a copy of her original email with the date on it. The manager apologized and said she would get back to her. Several weeks later, the young woman still hadn't heard anything and enquired about her payment again. The manager responded that the work was unacceptable — and it had not been delivered on time — and she would not pay for it. Of course it had not been late and it turned out that what flaws it had were easily fixed by another staff member. The young woman was eventually paid, but only three-quarters of what she had been contracted for. Wage theft of this sort is common among contract workers. Most people in this situation are not as persistent or fear retaliation — or don't know who to call for help.

I have learned much from being an advocate for staff. I have discovered negotiating skills I didn't know I possessed. Among other things, I spent three years helping to develop whistleblower protections for Bank staff. You see, the Bank is rather unique in that it doesn't fall under U.S. law, so we have to make our own law for everything. And when it doesn't work, we have to fix it. In this work I have learned the rewards of patience. I have learned to listen and to make myself heard. It isn't easy to be an advocate for people. The wounded do not come to you for your compassion, they come seeking results, they want an answer right now. Sometimes you can help, as I was able to do for the woman whose wages were being stolen. But sometimes you can't help as much as you would like.

In December 2005 a woman travelling in the Democratic Republic of Congo was stopped by a group of armed men. She was held at gunpoint and her life threatened, but eventually she and her driver escaped. Although shaken and uneasy about continuing her work, she was urged by her manager to complete her mission, which she did. On returning home, she developed severe headaches and other symptoms that were diagnosed as Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. The Bank's insurance fought every bill she submitted for several years, asking for details of her medical record that her lawyers and doctors considered inappropriate and unnecessary. This further compounded her symptoms. The Staff Association interceded several times in her case but we were unable to get officials to cut through the red tape to help. Finally this year, four years after the event, the woman won an adjudicated settlement for her case. But where, we have asked repeatedly, was the compassion she clearly needed? When you can't help, it hurts.

Sometimes I am deeply perplexed by the contradictions in workplace issues. Young staff members often come to me wanting opportunities for longer-term, more stable employment. They are sick of being stuck in the limbo of short-term contracting that is commonplace at the Bank. But opportunities are limited and those nearing age 62 come to me wanting the repeal of mandatory retirement at the Bank. Both situations are unfair, but solving either one has consequences for the other. Choices always have consequences. That is what makes us uneasy when asked "Which side are you on?"

In addition to my work at the World Bank, I am a member of the actor's union. As a member of the union I can audition for and appear in any union production in any union theater in the United States. Even small roles pay pretty well and come with health insurance and other benefits. However, there are far fewer such jobs than there are non-union jobs, so the opportunity is smaller. Eventually, I had to choose between more opportunity, or better opportunity. In the long run, choosing better opportunity has had a cost for me. That is not to say that choosing more opportunity would have been better — only that the consequences would have been different.

Choosing compassion as a workplace avocation is a choice whose costs, for me, have been relatively easy to bear. Service — “our law” — Can have tremendous rewards. I have drawn often from the UUCR well in my work as an advocate. I consider my work in this part of my life a testament to the better me I have built by walking among you.

As we wrap up our summer vacations and return to our hectic lives, I hope you will take this opportunity to do more than just go to work, do your job, and go home again. I hope you will rededicate yourself to compassion in your working relationships. Sure, one person alone cannot build a better place to work, but it only takes one person to start.

So may it be, Amen.