

Labor News Digest

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The Freedom to Join a Union

By Boyd Young

What if you showed up for work one day and your employer told you that you could not talk about politics in your community? What if your employer implemented a policy that Christians could not work for them, or anyone who owned a gun, or anyone who had more than three children? Like any American, you would be outraged because your fundamental rights to free speech, to religion, to own a gun, and to freely associate had been infringed upon.

There's no question that the right to organize is a basic fundamental right--it's about coming together to freely associate and change workplace conditions. But it's also a human right aimed at preserving the basic human condition--dignity, respect, a voice on the job. Maria, a new union member, says it best: "We joined the union because we wanted to be treated justly. We were united and we wanted our dignity. With the union, we gained respect as human beings."

Yet, today in the country that fancies itself the "land of the free," employers routinely violate the fundamental, human right to freely associate and form a union. To be sure, you can freely exercise all of your constitutional rights, except one: the right of freedom of association when that association happens to be a union. It's one thing to join the Knights of Columbus. It's quite another to organize a union.

Today, because of our governments' continued refusal to pass laws that adequately protect the right to organize, it's business as usual to engage in illegal, antiunion tactics. These include: discipline and discharge of workers who support the union, surveillance, bribes or special favors to employees who oppose the union, threatening to shut down or move the operations, just to name a few. These violations are not isolated: Sixty percent of employers use five or more antiunion tactics in an organizing drive. Through sheer savvy, ingenuity, and the ability to break through obstacles thrown in front of us, we are able to come back through two, three, or even four campaigns and organize the unorganized into our union.

Employers pay a hefty penalty for their illegal behavior, right? Wrong. If an employer violates the law during an organizing drive, the government simply runs another election--after the taint has already taken hold. And the only penalty that makes any difference to a corporation--monetary damages--is nonexistent.

Surely this does not happen in our industries, right? Wrong again. It happens every day in the paper, oil, chemical, light manufacturing, and other industries we are organizing. Many of the companies that we have good relationships with at our organized facilities attack your union during organizing drives.

I have the utmost admiration for those who stand up for a union today. I don't know about you, but I had it much easier when I joined the union. I walked into a paper mill that had a union contract with all of my rights spelled out in it. I did not have to fight for my rights. My union brothers and sisters had done that before me and left a legacy that improved the quality of my working life for the rest of my life. From that legacy of solidarity, we must begin to speak out for the right to organize.

How can you stand up for the freedom to join a union? The first step you can take is to organize "7 Days in June" events to highlight abuse against the right to organize. Log on to: www.aflcio.org/voiceatwork/7daysinjune to learn about events in your community.

Real change, however, rarely emerges from anything but sustained social protest and disruption of business as usual. I believe a march on Washington, D.C., and other social protests similar to the civil rights movement of the 60s are in order. The labor movement must begin to push for an eye-opening, nonviolent insurrection to remind the country how routinely workers' rights to organize are trampled. We each have a job someone pays us to do, but it is our obligation to stand together to create lasting change. After all, how free are we when the fundamental rights of workers in our industries are trampled with impunity?

The Pacesetter, 3340 Perimeter Hill Drive, Nashville, TN 37211.

16 Companies Have Filed Bankruptcy in the Past Two Years

Company	Employees
GS Industries	3,000
CSCLtd.	1,225
LTV Steel	18,000
Erie Forge & Steel	300
Heartland Steel	175
Northwestern Steel & Wire	1,600
Wheeling-Pittsburg Steel	4,800
Vision Metals	610
J&L Structural Steel	275
Gulf States Steel	1,906
Qualitech Steel	350
Worldclass Processing	80
Geneva Steel	2,600
Laclede Steel	1,475
Acme Metals	1,700
Al Tech Specialty Steel	790
TOTAL	38,886

United Steel Workers of America (USWA), 4069 Bradley Circle, NW, Canton, OH 44718-2565

Bush Watch

Where President Bush Stands on Working Family Issues--During his election campaign, President George W. Bush promised to be a "uniter, not a divider," and to place high priorities on working family concerns such as education and Social Security. Below is an example of a few months of what's going on with President Bush in office.

January 2001

- Blocked responsible contractor regulation;
- Nominated John Ashcroft to become Attorney General; and
- Nominated Linda Chavez to become Labor Secretary;

February 2001

- Proposed a federal budget that ignores working families' priorities;
- Moved toward privatizing a portion of Social Security;
- Repealed worker protection and labor-management relations rules;
- Included school vouchers in education proposal and failed to fund school repair and modernization;
- Proposed massive tax cut for the wealthy;
- Indicated he will lift ban on cross-border trucking;

March 2001

- Terminated the White House Office for Women's Initiatives and Outreach;
- Supported steps that will make a critical workers' compensation program less responsive to workers' needs;
- Ended the half-century practice of submitting names of federal judge nominees for review of their professional qualifications by the legal community;
- Vowed to veto bipartisan Patients' Bill of Rights;
- Eliminated a training, equipment, and fire prevention program for local fire departments, but restored funding under pressure from Fire Fighters;
- Repealed key worker safety rule;
- Called for "paycheck deception" to silence working families as part of campaign finance reform;
- Refused to adjust Census 2000 to correct a massive undercount, especially for people of color, children, and the rural and urban poor;
- Banned mechanics at Northwest Airlines from exercising their right to strike for a fair contract;
- Proposed raiding the Medicare trust fund, taking 15 years off Medicare's solvency;
- Ignored need for a comprehensive Medicare prescription drug program available to all seniors; proposed an inadequate alternative;
- Supported the mining industry's effort to delay rules when helping workers with black lung.

April 2001

- Suspended and moved to repeal contractor responsibility rules, which for decades have required that the government only do business with "responsible contractors."

Death of Ergonomics Standard Should Not Stop Companies From Creating a Safe Workplace

It took 10 years of research, political bickering, and public hearings for OSHA to issue an ergonomic standard last January. Then, within one month, Congress voted to overturn and repeal the rule. (See how your representative or senator voted by going to the AFL-CIO website, www.aflcio.org/vrecord/vr_interim.htm.) President Bush nailed the lid shut on the standard by approving Congress' resolution of disapproval March 20.

Since March 20, over 146,400 ergonomic injuries have occurred throughout this country. This amounts to a job-related ergonomic injury every 18 seconds in America, according to the AFL-CIO.

Repetitive stress injuries cost the economy--by conservative estimates--over \$50 million every year, according to a January 2001 report from the National Academy of Sciences. Each year employers pay between \$15 and \$18 billion in workers' compensation costs because of these injuries.

If enacted, the standards, according to OSHA, would have cost business \$4.5 billion annually, but saved

Death of Ergonomics Standard Should Not Stop Companies From Creating a Safe Workplace

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over \$9 billion in each of the first 10 years of its implementation. Many large and small companies that have enacted their own ergonomic prevention programs, which are similar to the OSHA standard, have found they improve the bottom line. Here is just a sample:

- 3M reported that following the implementation of an ergonomics program, lost-time injuries from musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) declined by 58 percent from 1990 to 1996.
- After implementing an ergonomics program in 1992, Xerox saw a 24 percent reduction in the number of MSD cases and a 56 percent reduction in direct costs associated with these injuries. As a result, Xerox's ergonomic injury/illness rate in manufacturing is currently 52 percent lower than OSHA's estimated annual incident rate for its industry group.
- Intel Corporation reported a 72 percent reduction in the rate of MSDs from 1994 to 1998 after implementing an ergonomics program with 20,000 days away from work avoided, accounting for more than \$10 million in direct and indirect savings.

Although the OSHA standard is defeated and would require an act of Congress to revive it, employers are wise to prevent MSDs in their workplaces. No longer can they say the scientific evidence is not there to support the connect between repetitive strain injuries and work. And now, they have other businesses as role models for successful ergonomic programs that save money and prevent pain in the workplace.

PACE International Union, P.O. Box 1475, Nashville, TN 37202.

Employees and Their Employers Benefit From a Recent Law

When workers and their employers both benefit from a law, that's a "win-win" situation. A recent law allows workers at full retirement age to continue working while receiving the full amount of their Social Security retirement benefits, no matter how much they earn. Employers get to keep valuable, experienced workers and their workers have a dual income while they're building a higher monthly Social Security benefit for the future, a definite "win-win."

For example, a trucking company owner was about to lose the services of three drivers who would reach 65, their full retirement age, this year. The drivers felt a need for change. They decided to apply for their monthly Social Security benefits and work part-time at other jobs that would allow them to keep their earnings within the annual limit, \$17,000 in 2000. Otherwise, their Social Security benefits would have been reduced \$1 for every \$3 they earned over the limit.

But when the new law went into effect, the company owner offered the drivers the opportunity to train new drivers and take on some administrative duties as well. The drivers welcomed the change of pace. They reconsidered their retirement decisions and decided to continue working at the trucking company.

The company owner was relieved. He was now able to keep three valuable employees who could share their years of experience with younger workers. At the same time, the employees receive the full Social Security benefits with no reduction because of their earnings. And, continuing to work could mean an increased benefit, because each year their additional earnings are posted to their records and their benefits are recalculated.

An increased benefit amount can be important to workers later in life. It also could increase the future benefits their families and survivors receive based on their earnings records. That's a definite "win" for the worker. And because the employer keeps valuable employees on board, it's a "win" for both.

The Ironworker, 1750 New York Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20006.

Union Plus Gift Card: The Perfect Gift...Every Time

Along with warmer weather, new flowers, and trees, summer brings many opportunities for members to remember their loved ones.

Now, members who carry the Union Plus Credit Card can mark special occasions like Father's Day, graduations, and weddings with a Gift Card. It can be used everywhere Master Card is accepted. With Union Plus Gift Card, they can be sure that every gift on their list is perfect because family and friends can use the cards to purchase whatever they like.

The cards are available in amounts from \$25 to \$250, plus \$6.95, including shipping and handling. The cards are good for one year from the date of issue. For more information or to purchase a Union Plus Gift Card visit www.upcard.com/giftcard or call 1-888-639-5985.

Union Plus Update Newsletter, 1-800-472-2005 or go to Union Plus at www.unionprivilege.org.

Union-made, U.S.-made Cars, Vans, Pickups

Cars--Union-made only in the U.S.

Buick-LeSabre, Park Avenue
Cadillac-DeVille, Eldorado, Seville
Chevrolet-Corvette, Malibu, Prizm
Chrysler-Cirrus (1), Prowler, Sebring, Sebring Convertible
Dodge-Avenger(1), Neon, Stratus, Viper
Ford-Mustang, Taurus, Thunderbird (2)
Lincoln-Continental, LS, Town Car
Mazda-626
Mercury-Cougar, Sable
Mitsubishi-Eclipse, Galant
Oldsmobile-Alero, Aurora, Intrigue
Plymouth-Breeze (1), Neon
Pontiac-Bonneville, Grand Am, Grand Prix
Saturn-EV1 (1), Saturn LS, Saturn S

Vans & Light Trucks--Union-made only in the U.S.

AM General-Hummer
Cadillac-Escalade
Chevrolet-Astro, Blazer/Trailblazer, express, S-10 pickup, Venture
Dodge-Dakota, Durango
Ford-Econoline/Club Wagon, Escape, Excursion, Expedition, Explorer, Explorer Sport Tac, Ranger
GMC-Envoy, Jimmy, Safari, Savana, Sonoma pickup, Yukon/Denali
Isuzu-Hombre pickup (5)
Jeep-Cherokee, Grand Cherokee, Wrangler
Lincoln-Blackwood (2), Navigator
Mazda-B-Series pickup (6), Tribute utility (6)
Mercury-Mountaineer, Villager
Nissan-Quest (6)
Oldsmobile-Bravada, Silhouette
Pontiac-Montana, Trans Sport
Toyota-Tacoma pickup

How to Be Certain It's Union-made in the U.S.A.

If you're looking at one of the new cars, light trucks, or vans that are both union-made in the U.S. and imported (see above), you can determine where it was assembled by checking two labels that each new vehicle sold in the U.S. is required by law to display.

Simplest and quickest is the "Parts Content Information" sheet that usually is posted on one of the vehicle's windows.

It lists, among other things, the location of the "final assembly point" of each vehicle.

The second label to check is the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN). If the first character of the 17-character VIN is a 1, a 4, or a 5, the vehicle was assembled in the U.S.

The VIN is stamped into a small metal plate attached to each vehicle's dashboard on the driver's side, often near the junction of the dashboard and the windshield.

Here is the meaning of some of the other first characters of the VIN: "2," Canada; "3," Mexico; "6," Australia; "9," Brazil; "J," Japan; "K," Korea.

Cars--Union-made in the U.S. & Imported

Chevrolet-Cavalier
Ford-Contour (1), Focus (3)
Mercury-Mystique
Pontiac-Sunfire
Toyota-Corolla(4)

Vans & Light Trucks--Union-made in the U.S. & Imported

Chevrolet-Silverado/Chevy pickup, Suburban, Tahoe
Chrysler-Town & Country
Dodge-Caravan/Grand Caravan, Ram pickup
Ford-F-Series pickup
GMC-Sierra pickup, Yukon XL
Plymouth-Voyager/Grand Voyager

NOTES

(1) Production in the U.S. has ended or soon will end, but some may still be found at dealers

(2) Production in the U.S. begins this year

(3) Ford Focus ZX3 model is built 100 percent in Mexico

(4) Assembled at NUMMI in California

(5) Made by General Motors

(6) Made by Ford

'The Union's First Responsibility Is to Our Members'

Ask the USWA's seventh President what the union is all about and Leo Gerard will sum it up in two words: "Dignity and Respect."

"Steelworkers want to be proud of what we do. We want to be proud of where we work. And we want to be proud of our union," he says. But in the cutthroat world of the global economy, where multinational conglomerates shift production from country to country with a computer keystroke, human values like pride in a job well done rank low on the corporate priority list. That's where the union comes in.

"Our union's first responsibility is to our members," said Gerard. It's a responsibility that lasts "24 hours a day, seven days a week," that reaches beyond the workplace to take in our communities, our nations, and the world.

"When issues like where we work and how we work--and even whether we'll work at all--are decided by politicians in Washington and Ottawa, or by secret entities like the World Trade Organization, the idea that unions shouldn't be involved in politics is nonsense," he says.

"If we don't fight for our members' interests from the shop floor to the highest pinnacles of power, if we forget for even a minute that an injury to one is an injury to all, then we aren't doing our job."

Life in the Union

Gerard's vision of the union as an instrument for social and economic justice, an organization that represents its members in the workplace and in society, began at an early age.

The son of a union miner, he grew up "in a little wee company house" in INCO Canada's company town of Lively, Ontario. Like every other child, he was educated in a company school. Like everyone else, he had to see the company doctor when he was sick.

But the lasting influence in his life came not from the mining company, but from the miners' union.

"My dad is my union hero," Gerard recalls. "Until I got to be a teenager, I don't have any memories that don't include the union."

Wilfred Gerard, an organizer for the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers union (which merged with the Steelworkers in 1967), often held meetings in the basement of their home, where young Leo would sit on the steps and listen. At the union hall, he took boxing lessons in the gym while his father took care of business upstairs. And he went to the local union's summer camp, where miners' children learned about unionism in addition to other camp activities.

As he grew older, Gerard began to help his father distribute the local's newspaper. "Instead of mailing, each workplace had a committee responsible for distribution," he recalls. "Lots of times on a Friday night, I'd leave my buddies and go leaflet the midnight shift with my dad."

Gerard had only one worry about going to work at INCO's smelter when he turned 18--the company's minimum weight requirement.

"I remember being worried about making weight, so I went and ate a big bunch of bananas before weigh-in," he says.

Activist and Leader

In the rough-and-tumble world of the mines, however, Gerard proved to be anything but a lightweight. He quickly became active in his local union, serving on the education, grievance, and health and safety committees, and married his high school sweetheart, Susan, during a five-month strike in 1969.

By the mid-1970s, he was chief steward and education committee chairman of Local 6500, whose 19,000 members were scattered throughout the mines and mills of Ontario's Sudbury Nickel Belt Basin.

It was experience that served him well when the newly elected Director of District 6, Stu Cook, recommended him for the union's staff in 1977. But it didn't prepare the young activist for the move from northern Ontario to Canada's largest metropolis. As he puts it, "Before I went to Toronto for the union, I'd never seen a road with more than two lanes."

Gerard credits his rapid rise through the union ranks--he was elected Director of District 6 in 1985, became National Director for Canada in 1991, and International Secretary-Treasurer in 1993--to "some really good people who took me under their wing and taught me."

In addition to his father, they include John Fitzpatrick, who was Toronto's Area Coordinator when Leo first went on staff; Gib Gilchrist, then Area Coordinator for Northeast Ontario; and Lynn Williams, former District 6 Director and the union's fifth President.

Among the most important of their many lessons, Gerard learned the importance of setting long-term goals, and of developing strategic plans to achieve those goals.

Planning and Action

It's an approach that's served the union well over the years. Gerard's innovative approaches to collective bargaining and political action in District 6 resulted in the first lifetime cost-of-living escalator on pensions, landmark health-and-safety legislation, and promotion of the Steelworkers Humanity Fund, which supports development projects in Canada and the third world.

Today's Medicare On-line

If you need health care information, you might want to check out one more place: the expanded Medicare website, www.medicare.gov. The site now includes more features and information tailored to meet the needs of the growing number of senior on-line users.

Some of the improvements you'll find at www.medicare.gov include:

- information about Medicare that is easier to find, read, and print, including a comparison of health plan options;
- new, annually updated information about the number of people who have dropped out of their Medicare + Choice plans. If you're trying to choose a health plan, this information may be valuable to you;
- new staffing information for nursing homes across the country, which includes the number of registered nurses and certified nursing assistants in each nursing home;
- an improved screen reader that lets people with visual disabilities access the Internet. This tool lets users who have screen readers "hear" the words on the screen; and
- new technology that allows quicker loading for people who use their telephone lines for access, helping them move through the site faster.

The Medicare website averages seven million visits per month. The next time you need information about Medicare benefits and health plan options, go to www.medicare.gov.

Did You Know?

J for Jobs

Union Labor Life Insurance Company's latest Minneapolis project achieves two goals with one loan: clean up a notorious block in downtown Minneapolis and provide almost 2,000 union jobs.

The \$51 million ULLICO loan funds construction of a \$134 million 211,000 square foot hotel-entertainment-retail complex to replace a square block of massage parlors, dangerous bars, and adult bookstores, Job for Justice said. "Minneapolis has a long history of being respectful of its workers and supporting the union movement, so we're especially pleased to be involved," said ULLICO President Robert Georgine, former Building Trades Department president, at the ground-breaking. J for Jobs guarantees projects will be built 100 percent union.

Good Job, Chicago

Labor successfully secured the Prevailing Wage Act to cover the new construction project on Chicago's historic Soldier Field and improvements on the surrounding Lakefront area. The proposal, which included the prevailing wage, passed the legislature in December 2000. The \$587 million project will create 2,000 new construction jobs.

Minimum Wage Grows in Washington State

While the Republican Congress in Washington, D.C., delays considering a much needed increase in the federal minimum wage, voters in Washington state will soon see the first increase resulting from their initiative to automatically raise the state minimum wage to keep pace with inflation.

Union TV Plays in Connecticut

A regularly scheduled labor program on cable TV in Connecticut has just begun its second season. The program highlights current worker struggles around the state, including a profile of janitors who marched from Windsor Locks to Hartford to protest their treatment by a contractor. Another story showed how Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees in New Haven won union recognition and a fair contract with support from local clergy, community activists, and students.

Connecticut AFL-CIO President John Olsen said, "I don't know of any other show that regularly blends kitchen-table economics with an appreciation for the contributions that working people make, without fanfare or publicity, to our state."

North American Labor Report, 1750 New York Ave., NW, Washington, DC 20006.