

Union representation from the individual, organizational, and societal perspectiv...

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Union representation from the individual, organizational, and societal perspective. Unions have played a large part in American society in the twentieth century and some of the issues surrounding union representation are still controversial in the twenty first century. The main reason for such tensions is that workers, company executives, and society at large all have different perspectives on work, and they do not always share exactly the same interests. Workers tend to look mainly at their own daily working lives, and they try to maintain wages, working conditions and job security for themselves. Company owners and shareholders look to the profit of the business as a primary concern, and they may at times be prepared to compromise on individual benefits in order to maximise profits and maintain the viability of the business. Society at large has an interest in stable and orderly working relationships so that families can enjoy regular wages but may also wish to influence the culture and practices that take place in the workplace. These are complex issues and it is quite difficult to balance all of these different concerns. Union representation is a device which is intended to help with this process. Unions are especially important for workers if there are problems in the workplace: ““ Workers are attracted to union representation if they are dissatisfied with working conditions and wages and believe that as individuals they do not have the power to bring about improvement.” (Chaison: 2006, p. 64) Not all managers and executives are good at what they do, and some display features which Dray describes as “ the oppressive hand of avarice” (2010, pp. 11-60) When workers feel that they are unfairly treated, or when there are injustices, unsafe practices, or exploitative wage systems, then unions have much more power than

individuals or small groups of workers. They can formulate demands on behalf of workers and make sure that the bosses take note. In a worst case scenario the unions can organize strikes in a bid to force bosses to listen to their workers' views. These are all useful measures when used wisely, and when workers are happy to join a union. There can be situations, however, when a worker does not want to join the crowd, take part in strikes, or support the policies of a particular union. This can be a disadvantage for some people, especially if they are in a minority in their workplace. From a company's perspectives unions can be seen as a troublesome phenomenon. From the very earliest days entrepreneurs were required to set the new country on its feet and provide jobs and opportunities for the waves of immigrants who arrived from Europe. Ideas such as socialism and the concept of worker solidarity arrived also with these immigrants but there were always tensions between those who created and managed the workers, and the workers themselves: " Early on, however, American workers learned something unfortunate about their country: it did not care much for labor unions." (Dray: 2010, p. 8) If unions are too strong, and if they press for benefits which the company cannot afford, then this can lead to financial problems and even the failure of the company as a whole. If unions and managers communicate wisely and well, however, this can be avoided and compromises which benefit both sides can be worked out. In society at large unions tend to get involved in local and national politics: " one of the unions' greatest political strengths is their ability to communicate with voters – members and non-members, workers and the public in general ... lobbying is another basic political activity of unions." (Chaison: 2006, p. 134) Union

leaders can have an effect on elections, if they call on their members to vote for one candidate or another. This is no different from the collective influence of business owners who use their high level connections. Overall the influence of unions helps to ensure that working class voices are heard in places where decisions are made. In modern America the way that unions are formed and operate is governed by the National Labor Relations Act and it guarantees certain rights for all workers who are allowed to join a union: “Employees covered by the NLRA are guaranteed the right to form, join, decertify, or assist a labor organization, to work together to improve terms and conditions of employment, and to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, or to refrain from such activities.” (NLRB website, accessed 20th Feb. 2011) The last provision is important, because it ensures that individuals are not pressurized or even forced into joining a union if they do not want to. Overall, unions can cause friction, and disrupt organizations and society at large, but on the other hand they are an important channel for collective bargaining and they help to ensure that standards of fairness are maintained in the workplace. References Chaison, G. N. (2006) *Unions in America*. Thousand Oaks: Sage. Dray, P. (2010) *There is Power in a Union: The Epic Story of Labor in America*. New York: Doubleday. National Labor Relations Board Website, “Rights we protect”. Accessed on 20th Feb. 2011 and available at: <http://www.nlr.gov/rights-we-protect>