



Labor

25 May 2020

Labor in the 21st century is far different than it was at this time in the 20th century. In order to discuss the future of organized labor, it is important to agree on this fact. A century ago, labor was much more about hands-on, assembly-line, sweatshop – related labor. Not that we don't have that today, but it is not as predominant as it was then. In addition, monopolies were common and lack of competition and alternatives made it difficult for labor to negotiate hourly pay and benefits.

Today, not only is employment in America more aligned with the service industry (versus manufacturing) and higher wages but there are also more alternatives for workers in search of rewarding employment. If one does not like his or her job, the distributed workforce allows for a multitude of opportunities depending on the industry and the individual. Also - and this is important - communication and transparency are ubiquitous today, certainly in juxtaposition to a century ago. If an employee is unhappy with an employer (person or entity), he or she just needs to click a button and the world is aware. This does not ensure a positive response but awareness is the first step to any corrective action plan; a problem must be identified before corrective action can be initiated.

So workers have more opportunities, better communication, much-improved working conditions and a greatly improved standard of living as a result of these factors.

However, as long as productivity metrics are built-in to the definition of corporate success and as long as humans are able to lead other humans, abuses of labor will be baked into the formula. At the very least, time will erode whatever good intentions were originally agreed upon. On top of that, the rudimentary economic law of supply and demand will have an effect on the higher wages we might be enjoying today in the service sector unless we create new demands for new types of labor.

From a personal perspective, productivity, leadership and the laws of capitalism are very important to me - but so is the dignity and earning power of the labor force. I don't see them as mutually exclusive which is why I have defined my own theory of expansion based on aggressive, destabilizing yet positive change. Productivity metrics must take into account the intangibles related to quality of life. Leaders must be trained and held accountable for their ability to lead human beings, not simply processes and balance sheets. And, contrary to many of my laissez-faire libertarian capitalist friends, I do not believe that the natural law of commerce should go unchecked. I would feel differently about this last concept if the predictable law of Keynesian commerce did not consistently come under the influence of the more capricious principal of Freudian human nature.

Therefore, I believe commerce and the human side of labor can and must exist in harmony and balance. Human laws and regulations must be in place to protect workers, of course, but they must be effective and attentive to all constituents. This is where effective government and play a meaningful role. It should not be actively involved in the daily deployment of commerce, particularly if leadership and labor are generally working together towards shared high-level objectives. Utilizing the basic 80/20 rule, if 80% of the economy is working well, leave it alone. It is acceptable for government to focus on the 20% in order to correct failures by exercising its rights of enforcement remediation. What is wrong is when governments starts writing laws to deal with the 20%, adversely affecting the 80%. It seems, as I have expressed in other writings, that we as a society seem to be more focused on the 20% rather than the 80%.

Organized labor, historically, has been the voice of the main-stream skilled worker. Around the time of the Civil War, it was the only voice and only something of a whisper until it gained traction over time. Today, on the other hand, the worker has the Internet and OSHA and, generally a better educated chain of command, from the worker all the way up to the owner or manager.

However, I believe organized labor is vital to a healthy American economy. Just as protests are vital to American civil liberties, without their "check", there can be no balance. Labor must be organized or the system will be abused. In addition, when I have seen organize labor at its best, it is doing more than simply obstructing capitalism with strikes and contract disputes. It is training its members to be the best in their industry. It is openly marketing itself on behalf of its roofers or electricians, for example, as the optimal choice for anyone seeking a particular skilled service or product. It is working with the community so that is inextricably interwoven into the fabric of the family/neighborhood unit. And, most importantly, it has developed leaders who understand their roles and obligations to the membership.

I support the role of organized labor as a necessity in the American capitalist structure. It is necessary for the employee to have a voice and some influence in his or her work life. On top of this, I believe in the tools that unions brings to the table in support of its members – not excluding the labor strike but likewise including training, marketing, lobbying, etc. These tools fit seamlessly into the DETOX model if planned and implemented correctly. A labor strike, executed in an organized and appropriately continuous manner cannot help but affect positive and enduring change. However, the system needs to be evaluated and relaunched. Simple priorities and objectives related to the customers of organized labor – and, indeed, of those businesses and societal entities that benefit from labor – need to be defined, communicated and implemented. All constituents must be included in the conversation and benefit from the solutions.

Let's get started.