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If Power Corrupts, What About Unions?

By George C. Leef

We hear Lord Acton's saying "Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely" so often that we're apt to forget why it's true. When some people can command others, the tendency is for those with power to start using the others as pawns.

This helps to explain the continuing erosion of the desire for union representation. Fifty years ago, 36 percent of America's private sector workers were represented by a union. Now, it's only 8 percent – and would be even lower if more private-sector employees had a real choice. In a recent Zogby poll, only 27 percent of unionized workers agreed that the AFL-CIO spoke for them most of the time.

Unionism has lost much of its former allure. Why?

The root of the problem is that unionism is based on coercion rather than consent. Workers can't just sign up for union services as they would for, say, an internet service provider, staying with it as long as they think they're getting good value.

Instead, the law makes union representation a collective decision by majority vote that's binding indefinitely. Most workers with union representation have never even had a chance to vote on the union. If they don't like it, all they can do is quit – though in many states, they must still give the union a portion of their paycheck.

No other kind of private organization in the U.S. has the authority to compel people to accept its services. Americans love freedom of choice, but anachronistic laws that unions secured in the 1930s have set up a system that gives them monopoly power.

This system also gives union leaders great power over the people they claim to represent. They might accomplish some good, but they also might do things that are detrimental.

Dues money, for instance, might be spent on things union officials like but workers don't. Frequently, dues go to support candidates and causes with which the workers disagree.

The list of union abuses is long. Sometimes union officials, fearful of appearing weak, have opted to sacrifice jobs rather than agree to wage and benefit concessions necessary to save an employer from financial ruin.

Sometimes violence has been unleashed against workers who criticize union bosses or courageously keep working during a strike. Often workers see large amounts of their dues money squandered. In Florida, for instance, the long-time boss of the United Teachers of Dade went to federal prison for plundering the union treasury to support a lavish lifestyle.

A recent case illustrates why so many American workers are wary of unions. In

California, Los Angeles County politicians declared the Service Employees International Union to be the bargaining agent for more than 97,000 home health care providers. Most of them were caregivers for elderly family members. They weren't asked if they wanted union representation. Union-backed politicians just declared that because these workers were paid by public funds, the union should "represent" them.

The care-providers suddenly found themselves paying union dues for services they didn't want. Later they discovered that the SEIU was charging them more than the amount legally allowed. Carla West, the lead plaintiff in a lawsuit against the SEIU, said that she especially resents the fact that union officials got money that could have gone to care for her elderly mother. A settlement required the union to repay nearly \$8 million in illegally seized dues.

Is it any wonder that many Americans now think that unions are mostly interested in getting a slice of their paychecks? It was one of America's biggest mistakes to enact laws that transformed unions from voluntary associations into monopolies with quasi-governmental authority. In Right to Work states such as Florida, dissatisfied workers can't be forced to pay union dues, but they still may have to accept union representation they don't want.

The great thing about freedom of choice and competition is that it prevents businesses from taking their customers for granted. Free choice regarding unions would be equally beneficial. July's breakup of the AFL-CIO has people asking what strategy unions should pursue to reverse their long decline. The one thing that would work is freedom of choice.

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