

Why Unions are relevant

A union is an independent self-regulating organization of workers created to protect and advance the interests of its members through collective action. But do unions have a future? In today's world of individual employment contracts, performance-related pay schemes, Human Resource and Total Quality Management and all the other ingredients of the so-called 'new' workplace, unions are often regarded as anachronistic obstacles preventing success of the market economy. Consequently, unions are being labeled as obsolete institutions out of touch with new realities, incapable of change and no longer serving a useful purpose.

However, I feel that there is still a great need for them. One of the reasons for this is that a lot of the time people enter into a job with little or no knowledge of their rights within the workplace. Unions exist to provide this knowledge. It can also be argued that actual legal representatives, or solicitors, can perform the same functions, but I disagree. Unlike solicitors, who have to deal with a wide range of situations, unions are a more convenient source for workers to turn to. They are ideally placed within the organization, and they are totally dedicated to the main concern, which is to protect and advance the interests of its members, the workers.

Moreover, unions exist because an individual worker has very little power to influence decisions that are made about his or her job. The greatest advantage in joining a union is that by doing so individuals possess a greater chance of having a voice and influence in their place of work. By joining forces with other workers, an individual's opinions and beliefs regarding their job will also be voiced by other union members, thus creating a stronger stance against management, if needed. Therefore, the main purpose of a union is to protect and improve people's pay and conditions of employment. This objective is usually achieved through negotiation and representation.

Negotiation is where union representatives discuss with management issues that affect people working in an organization. The union finds out the members' views and relays them to management. Pay, working hours, holidays and changes to working practices are the sort of issues that are negotiated. However, not all views will be taken on-board by management; there may be a difference of opinion between them and union members. Negotiation, therefore, is about finding a solution to these differences. This process is also known as collective bargaining. In many work places there is a formal agreement between the union and the company, which

states that the union has the right to negotiate with the employer and must be recognized for collective bargaining purposes.

People who work in organizations where unions are recognized are better paid, and are less likely to be made redundant than people who work in non-union organizations. Most collective bargaining takes place quietly with the union and the employer reaching an agreement quickly. Occasionally disagreements do occur, and in these cases the union may decide to take action. Unions can represent individuals when they encounter problems at work. If an employee feels that they are being unfairly treated, he or she can ask the union representative to help sort out the difficulty with the manager or employer.

Apart from negotiation and representation, many other benefits can be gained by joining a union. One of these benefits is the fact that unions can offer their members legal representation. Usually this is to help people to get financial compensation for work-related injuries, or to assist people in taking their employer to court. Members can also take full advantage of the wealth of information which can be obtained from unions, of which can prove invaluable. For example, the kind of information available is the length of holiday that an employee is entitled to each year, the amount of pay an employee would be entitled to if they took maternity leave, and how training can be obtained at work.

Unions have increased the range of services they offer their members. These include:

- Education and Training - most unions run training courses for their members on employment rights, health and safety, and other issues. Some unions also help members who have left school with little education by offering Courses on basic skills and courses leading to professional qualifications.
- Legal Assistance - as well as offering legal advice on employment issues, some unions give help with personal matters, like housing, wills, and debt.
- Financial Discounts - people can get discounts on mortgages, insurance and loans from unions.
- Welfare Benefits - one of the earliest functions of unions was to look after members who hit hard times. Some of the older unions offer financial help to their members when they are sick or unemployed.

For these reasons I believe that unions will exist for as long as there are jobs and that the future of the unions lies with its past. It has managed to overcome major obstacles in its time, and has

come through it damaged, but still existent. I feel that unions will remain adaptable and pragmatic enough to grow once again into this new century, and into the next.

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