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Dating back as far as 1866 (when the National Labor Union was founded (AFL-CIO, 2010)), workers in America seek to unions as a way to handle the complaints they have against management.  But why do employees join unions?  One of the main reasons I perceive, is that employees seek out unions for overall fairness.  When we feel like our bosses are being unfair we can turn to a union representative, explain our complaint and they will handle it for us.  It’s an edge up.  A tool in our handbags to assist in the fight.  A human resources text dived into this particular issue in a publication in 2005.  They stated that that there are three main reasons an employee will join a union.  Dissatisfaction, lack of power and union instrumentality were listed. (Aswathappa, 2005) Fairness, as my assessment perceives, was not on this list however Aswathappa says “Employees seek union membership to improve work situation.  Employees believe unionization fetches them power, power interned is believed to remove dissatisfaction.  Employees join unions as instruments to remove dissatisfaction.”  I found this most fascinating because I believe it is a power and control issue on some level.  The text explains that the original reasons we saw unions form was because of inhuman work conditions, work hours, horrible pay and even hiring and firing tactics.  The employees felt they had no power over the situation when the paycheck was life or death to their struggling families.  They explain that unions started out fighting for economic type issues: wage rates, life and health insurance and job security.  Today we are seeing unions continue with those roles but also take up empowerment participation, productivity, competitive advantage issues and the like.

            The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) is the largest federation of unions in the United States.  In wanting to fully understand what the employee gets out of being in a union the AFL-CIO has listed many statistics representative of the US Labor Department data.  The following data is based on weekly earned income between union workers and non-union workers. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014)

According to the AFL-CIO not only are wages hire for union members across gender and ethnicity, the amount of sick leave earned, guaranteed pension plans and job-related health insurance are all leaps and bounds higher than those of nonunion status.  (US Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015) So these statistics tell me that there are a lot of benefits to joining unions. Of course, unions require regular dues and/or fees from its members, but it seems to me that the benefits are overall worthy.  The AFL-CIO will assist workers in areas where there are no unions in creating on for themselves.  Exactly how to form, how to run elections and meetings and all other pertinent data can be found on their website. (AFL-CIO, 2016)

            I mentioned fairness at the beginning of the paper as an issue that I felt was at the core of exploring why employees join unions. In exploring statistical data created in a Farber-Saks model using demographics such as race, job specialty, job security, promotion and attitude toward promotion as variables, D. W. Snyder deduces the following: “Workers who experience favoritism or discrimination do not necessarily vote for unionization but workers who believe unions protect against unfair supervisors do tend to favor unionization.  Apparently, it is not the worker’s personal situation which is decisive but rather his or her own perception of whether a union is likely to alter that situation.” (Snyder, 1983) Snyder also points out that when workers perceive themselves in line for a promotion they are less likely to stay with or join a union around that time period.  They believe that it makes management positively view them over other unionized competition.  Taking aside certain job specialties like teachers or miners for example, just looking at union members vs. nonunion members, Snyder was able to see that across the board it was specific issues that workers had and most importantly, maybe didn’t even experience, only perceive them as issues.  Almost like “would-be” issues.  I asked around at Hill Air Force Base (AFB) in Utah to Federal employees I knew were a part of the union and was surprised to hear many say they joined out of loyalty.  They joined because of the things the union had done for the workers prior to even their own hire.  (Partington, 2016) Captain Partington of Hill AFB Fire Department explained that years prior the union he was a part of fought long and hard for the Fire Fighters’ Pay Bill (United States Office of Personnel Management, 2001) that they were currently under which regulated all of the hours, overtime, sick time and leave the firefighters were to receive.  “Without this bill we would not be paid extra for the 32 hours a week we work in overtime when working our concurrent 48 hour shifts.”  Although Captain Partington had never used his union to help him fight for anything in the past 12 years with the department he still felt loyalty and paid his monthly dues without question.  This shows what Snyder concluded.  That perceived fairness, perceived issue solutions and basically knowing the union is there is what truly draws employees to join a union.

            I believe that employees all throughout the world join unions for the ultimate ability to have fair labor practices throughout all they do daily.  Whether we label that as pay, benefits, equal opportunity, promotion potential, safe work conditions or fairness in and of itself, employees have decided they have a right be heard.  The power no longer can lie solely with the employer.  Not if the employers want a stable, reliable workforce.  Having a union to support you when and if you need it is very important to the majority of today’s workforce.  And like we saw from the Captain of the Fire Department, they may never actually use it, but knowing it’s there helps employees to sleep better at night.

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