

WITNESS FOR JUSTICE

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Workers Need the Right to Form Unions

Times are not good for working Americans. Unemployment is skyrocketing. Income for a typical working family is lower than in 2000, driven down by declines in wages and hours of work. Employers provided health insurance to 3 million fewer people in 2007 compared with 2000. The economic situation for many folks has worsened over the past year. But incomes, wages, health insurance, and job security have trended downward for years.

Whether in the workplace or the offices of elected officials, the interests of working people and retirees – that is, the majority of people in the country – carry little weight. One major reason is the decline in labor unions. You have probably seen the bumper sticker: “Unions: the people who brought you the weekend.” It’s true. Unions also played key roles in winning higher wages, safety protections, health insurance, pensions, overtime pay, the minimum wage, Social Security and a host of other important things that we often take for granted. All of these victories were the result of long, hard-fought political and workplace struggles in which organized and savvy workers – labor union members – played a pivotal role.

Today, 16 million workers are members of unions, just 12% of the workforce. The numbers have been declining since the 1970s but this is not because workers don’t want unions. Polls show 50 to 60 million would like to have a union if they could. But in too many cases, workers seeking to organize are blocked by employers using a combination of illegal tactics and legal ones (some of which are prohibited in countries with stronger protections for workers).

Consider two examples. Workers in the largest hog slaughterhouse in the world, located in rural N. Carolina, have dirty, tough, and dangerous jobs. In 1994 and 1997 they tried to freely vote on whether to form a union. To influence the election outcome, according to court findings, the employer engaged in numerous illegal and egregious activities against union supporters including assaults, false arrests, threats of violence, intimidation, coercion, spying, and unjust firings, suspensions, and disciplinary actions. The firm’s penalty, which came only after years of legal battles, was a slap on the wrist. Finally, with support from allies around the country, the workers were able to make a free choice and brought in a union in 2008, fourteen years after their first attempt. Nurses in Louisville, KY, had majority support for a union but lost “secret ballot elections” in 1989 and 1994 after their employer illegally intimidated and fired union supporters, according to judges. They are still trying, 20 years later. These and many other cases show the current “election” system used to assess employees’ preferences for a union is broken.

The Employee Free Choice Act, a bill being considered by both houses of Congress, strengthens workers internationally-recognized human right to form a union, should they choose to do so. Corporate America is fighting hard against it. Workers and their allies need to be just as committed. The stakes are high. Strengthening workers’ right to form a union is a critically important step toward a better future for us all.

For more information go to Jobs with Justice <http://www.jwj.org/freechoice/index.html> or Interfaith Worker Justice <http://www.iwj.org/template/page.cfm?id=200>