

# From Chaos to Order: How the Labor Movement has Impacted the Employee – Supervisor Relationship

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## SOLUTIONS

Anyone who has followed this year's legislative session will know that labor unions' roles in Missouri state government have been a highly debated issue. Additionally, anyone who has worked for an executive branch agency during the past three years has probably asked, "How will unions affect my workplace?"

Political debates and uncertainties among managers and employees related to organized labor are nothing new for the American workforce. These issues and questions can often be resolved about as easily as answering questions about the meaning of life, in that there are many opposing views, and each side is sure their view is the correct one. Perhaps a more solvable problem is understanding the relationship between employees and supervisors once a union agreement is in effect. Gaining this understanding may be a new concept for many managers and supervisors in Missouri State Government.

In order to better understand this relationship, it is helpful to understand the history of the American labor movement and how it has impacted the evolution of the labor/management relationship.

Like every great story, the American labor movement begins with chaos, which was brought to order through some type of heroic intervention. The heroes in this case are the workers and managers of the industrial age.

You are probably familiar with the existence of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) that was initially passed into law in 1935, but the story really begins around the time of the U.S. civil war.

Many historians view the end of the Civil War as the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The need for military uniforms led to some of the first true mass production operations in one factory building. This of course, created situations where large numbers of people were employed by one employer whose primary goal was to produce as many "widgets" (in this case, military uniforms) as possible in the shortest period of time and at the lowest possible cost.

In other words, the temptation for profit-driven business owners to work their employees very long hours at very low wages in this unregulated environment was great. Like most other circumstances in the history of humanity, where large masses of people were pushed to a level of intolerance, a revolution was imminent. This revolution came in the form of organized labor.

One of the first true labor organizations was the Knights of Labor (KOL). Initially the KOL was more of secret society than an outspoken activist organization. Joining such an organization was sure to lead to termination of employment since there were no laws to grant employees such a right. The key goals of the KOL were to personalize the relationship between labor and management in mass production environments and to improve the morale of these employees and their role in society. As the KOL membership grew, they became stronger and more vocal.

Other organizations also got involved. Other early labor organizations include the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the American Federation of Labor (AFL), who later merged with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to become what is known today as the AFL-CIO, the present day federation that most of today's labor unions are affiliated with.

Management's goal to keep organized labor out along with labor's goal to collectively organize and fight for workers' rights ultimately led to major bouts of violence, riots and strikes through the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The impact this had on business, the economy and society in general was what led to the need for government interventions.

One of the key strategies of labor organizations, then and now, is to serve as political lobbyists and attempt to gain legal rights for the employees they represent. In 1935, these efforts paid off. The aforementioned, National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) was passed.

This legislation was a part of President Roosevelt’s New Deal program and was steered by a U.S. Senator from New York, Robert Wagner. For this reason, the NLRA is often known as the “Wagner Act.” The NLRA formalized the role of labor unions and encouraged collective bargaining. Many argued that the Wagner Act gave the unions too much power. The Act was later amended by the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947, which was designed to create greater balance between labor and management under the NLRA.

While there are many detailed procedures and laws that govern the behavior of labor and management in the collective bargaining process, there is one major concept that is critical for managers and supervisors to understand in the day-to-day relationship between labor and management. This is the concept of **good faith bargaining**.

Meeting in good faith requires that both parties “demonstrate a sincere and honest intent to resolve issues and reach agreements and exhibit reasonableness in their bargaining positions, tactics and activities.”

The good faith standard is designed to open the channels of communication between labor and management. In other words, in order for the labor/management relationship to work effectively, employees and supervisors should feel comfortable to discuss their differences and work out solutions. A common misconception among supervisors, when their employees unionize, is that they can no longer communicate with their employees. This is often what causes breakdowns in the labor/management relationship.

In the recent agreements negotiated with the unions representing state employees, we have included language in the grievance procedures which states that:

***“The parties agree that in order for the grievance procedure to function efficiently and effectively, all grievances should be settled at the earliest possible step.”***

The “earliest possible step” is always the immediate supervisor. There have been numerous discussions that have risen to unnecessarily high levels simply because there was a breakdown in the communication between an employee and their supervisor.

Resolving disputes between labor and management may not always be easy and investigation may be necessary to get to the bottom of some issues. However, it is important to remember that a little respect and understanding can really go a long way – and that keeping the lines of communication open between supervisors and employees does not need to be a threatening process.

Source:

The Labor Relations Process (*sixth edition*) by William Holley, Jr. and Kenneth M. Jennings; The Dryden Press, 1997.



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