

Unions Are Alive and Well, But Industry Is Better Off Without Them

Q How active are unions in trying to organize golf course maintenance workers?

A In recent years, they've been very active. A recent edition of the *Los Angeles Times* carried a story in the business section by the paper's labor writer under the headline, "New Group of Union Leaders Ready." The article opened with this paragraph: "The UCLA Labor Center graduates its first class of trained union leaders — 26 low-wage immigrant workers who have spent the last week studying labor history and learning to be better organizers and strategists." The article went on to say: "... The seminar ... was the first in a union leadership series ... funded by the state through the Institute for Labor and Employment."

Let's leave aside the obvious question of why California is using tax money to pay for union-organizer training, when unions themselves have plenty of cash in the form of dues and fines from their members. What jumps out is that the U.S. labor movement at present is focused on the "low-wage immigrant worker." That description fits a lot of our permanent and seasonal hourly golf course maintenance workers in many areas of this country. Several unions have, at various times and places in recent years, made golf course maintenance workers a primary organizing target.

One might think that only a few national unions (The Teamsters?) would be interested in organizing our labor force. But people I'm acquainted with in this industry have faced off recently against the Longshoremens, Service Employees International, United Culinary Workers, UAW and others. With union

Been there, seen that

BY MIKE HEACOCK



membership continuing a steep 30-year decline in the United States, most unions feel free to organize wherever they see opportunities.

While there are a fair number of unionized course operations in the United States, Las Vegas is the only major city I'm aware in which most golf courses are unionized. Las Vegas is a "union town," but even so there are still many nonunion courses. How do some courses in Las Vegas remain nonunion? One key, of course, is economic — wages and benefits must be competitive in the local market. They don't have to equal or exceed the highest-wage union courses, but they have to be competitive.

This doesn't always work, however. I know of one course that went union because the crew — all young, single men with nothing to lose — was convinced that the union could get them double the area-wide wage through collective bargaining. That never happened, they all quit to do something else, and that union went away.

Surprisingly to some, wages and benefits are not the primary reason some golf course maintenance workers vote to bring in a union — or to keep one out. I've been a member of five different unions at various times in my checkered working career, including one of the U.S. Postal Workers' unions for a few years. Working conditions in the U.S. Postal Service are typical of the

original recipe that created unions, and which still result in management vs. union strife on a continuing basis. Management in the postal service, at least in the bigger cities, tends to treat workers as anonymous, interchangeable low-value units rather than unique individuals. Time pressures are usually tight; workloads can be very high; the work is repetitive, physical, often mind-numbing; and one letter carrier (worker) can substitute for another. This general description could apply, as well, to some course maintenance operations.

Unions are invited by workers to try to organize when the brightest workers in the company no longer trust management to communicate respectfully with them as valued individuals, and when workers feel that management makes arbitrary decisions that have a negative impact on them.

An example I've seen of management mistreating workers is the superintendent who's having marital problems and takes his frustration out on his crew. Another is the manage-by-intimidation type, a management style that is thankfully disappearing along with the dinosaurs who practice it.

The bottom line: You'll retain more management flexibility and have fewer grievance-type problems to deal with if you can avoid unionization. Everyone is better off if your management style is enlightened enough that a union is not warranted. That won't guarantee that union organization won't happen, but it will give you a much better chance to avoid it.

Editor's Note: Mike Heacock, former vice president of agronomy and maintenance for American Golf Corp., fields your questions in his bimonthly column. You can reach him at: mike.heacock@verizon.net or 310-849-5011.