



Of Unions, Elections, and Dreams

By Pat Norton, Golf Course Superintendent, Nettle Creek Country Club

Initially I'm going to say a few words about unions, like the kind we all read about in US history class, that organized workers and industries in early 20th century America. And somewhat like the kind that are trying to organize golf course laborers down here in Chicago Land... and unlike the unions that one grows in the garden.

Unions are not grown in the garden, you say? Unions and onions are decidedly different, you say? I say that you are probably correct... but they have their similarities. They are both useful and have their place in this world... but can be overdone and overused to the point of leaving a decidedly bad taste in the mouth!

There are, in my opinion, many good reasons for the existence of labor unions here in the USA. In the decades since the Industrial Revolution, labor unions here and around the world have been a real help to the working man and his family.

Indeed, if it were not for the formation of labor unions in various American industries and the laws in this democracy that permit/permitted this sort of labor organizing, American industry and American 20th century history would have been decidedly different! We might not have the great American middle class as we know it today!

Note how many other countries in this world have a much greater gap between the "halves" and the "have nots." Look at some other countries of this modern world. Almost weekly we hear about overseas sweat shops, child labor abuse, over-the-border multinational auto plants exploiting cheap labor, and guess what? Some of our very own American corporations are among the worst offenders at exploiting this situation at the expense of people in many Third World countries!

There are dozens of reasons as to why the USA has become so highly developed... among them the rise of organized labor.

Far more important in the development of our American society has been the idea of people having the freedom to pursue their dreams, utilizing the Judeo-Christian work ethic taught to each generation of American youth.

How many of us were taught to rely on the union to insure our workplace success? Don't we all distinctly remember our parents teaching us the values of hard work, education, and determination in our mutual quest to fulfill dreams? I really don't remember at all my parents teaching me or my siblings that we could expect a labor

union to help us through life's trials and tribulations... keeping us employed no matter our professional value!

Therein lies my basic problem with labor unions. I realize and accept their importance in many workplace situations, but many unmotivated, lazy people work the union system to keep themselves employed! There are many great examples of labor unions being truly needed and valued.

Unfortunately, there are too many examples of extreme problems with labor unions. There are, in my opinion, too many situations in which labor unions protect unproductive, low value workers, which makes for a bad situation for other industrious types... in whatever industry. I have many hardworking friends who are employed in union situations here in south Chicago Land; in fact, the Joliet area is heavily unionized.

They are all industrious, intelligent, creative and mainly concerned with making a good living and providing for



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their families. In fact, I applaud and congratulate my Hispanic friends who have graduated from NCCC and moved on to one of the unionized plants in our area. Better pay, much better benefits, definite year round work, which they deserve and which they will retain because of their great work ethic.

Most of the union guys that I know could positively be compared with any golf course superintendent!

Some other acquaintances in town, not really friends of mine, really do milk the union system and it makes me somewhat perturbed. They have this invisible layer of job protection provided by the almighty union, so no matter their attitude, work habits or lack of desire to work, they keep their position intact! And heaven help the naive manager who institutes proceedings to get rid of the dead weight. Inevitably Mr. Worthless gets reinstated, with the naive manager getting the cold shoulder or much worse from everybody else!

My resentment is fueled by the growing realization that we in the golf superintendent position have precious little job security. Not nearly enough job security. Too many guys have their heads on the chopping block lately and live with the real possibility that all those years of service to a golf facility may not be enough to sustain a career.

Superintendents have to look into themselves and depend upon themselves to sustain their careers. Unfortunately, we have no larger organization negotiating on our behalf for salaries, stock options, or benefits.

I resent the fact that so many of these union guys are able to retire at approximately age 55 with these great pensions and buyouts! Wouldn't that be nice?

What do superintendents get at age 55? If they are still in the business, that means that they're really good and that their club does appreciate them. A very high percentage of us have left the business due to burnout and frustration, moving on and searching for a position that will provide security and benefits. Maybe they go join a union somewhere!

Labor unions are a fact of life here, to the point where our course offers golfers a discount if they show their union card!

Hey, would I love to have a professional labor organization representing me and my superintendent brethren in the golf course world. an association with real bite and power to prevent me from getting fired should I temporarily screw up or piss off the wrong people! But, problem is, no such organization exists for golf course superintendents. We sink or swim on our own merits and at times get sunk by forces beyond our control.

One of the locals of the Teamsters is making a strong effort to organize golf course maintenance staff personnel at various golf courses across Chicago Land. Alarming, they have had some very real success and will probably continue to successfully organize workers down in this region.

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Is there merit in the case that they are making to these men and women, primarily Hispanic, to join the union? Definitely yes, under certain circumstances. Here are a few examples:

- There have been situations that I've encountered in which golfers, management or fellow staff members make derogatory, racist comments or jokes about our Mexican employees... usually overheard by myself either on the course or in the clubhouse. Sometimes I confront the person and sometimes I'll let it go.

- There have been more than a few instances of complaints about "them Mexicans" not showing enough courtesy to golfers on the course, usually from beer soaked patrons who expect, but never show, courtesy to others!

- There was one instance in particular this fall in which two of my key men were winterizing the irrigation system and accidentally sprayed a guy with water and high pressure air. This jerk and his friend threatened our employees with physical harm and raised fists, and accused them of harassment as they played their round of golf! I happened upon the scene about five minutes after the initial confrontation, and proceeded to have a very heated argument with these two losers, defending Manuel and Lupe, who have faithfully been with the club for about three years!

- There are many landscaping firms down here who don't pay overtime to their Mexican laborers. Would we, as golf course superintendents, ever consider not paying overtime to a white dude? Probably not.

- There is a widespread attitude in this area among the locals that the Mexican population contributes very little, are a drain on government, and steal jobs from "whitey." Interesting also that these same ignorant types would never consider doing the necessary work taken on routinely and without complaining by others.

- There is a much better attitude among the young concerning ethnic diversity, I think. Lots of good Hispanic students, athletes, and friends all across the school system makes things more equal on their level. In fact, my 16-year old son spoke up right away upon reading this column. He's in his youth and innocence and has noted the subtle racism that too many public golfers have toward Mexicans.

Ryan says. "So would Hispanic golf course workers like a strong union representing them?" I think they might. You know what they would like even more? EQUAL RESPECT. Wouldn't you want equal respect if you were living in Mexico? You would. So wait! I know some of you out there are thinking I am full of something right now. Why? Take a closer look next time... who should be making fun of the Hispanic mowing the lawn on # 17 or your beer soaked buddy who can't hit the ball and is slobbering on himself? So I ask you strongly to enforce keeping racism off of the golf course!

So, I guess that the soapbox better close down for now.

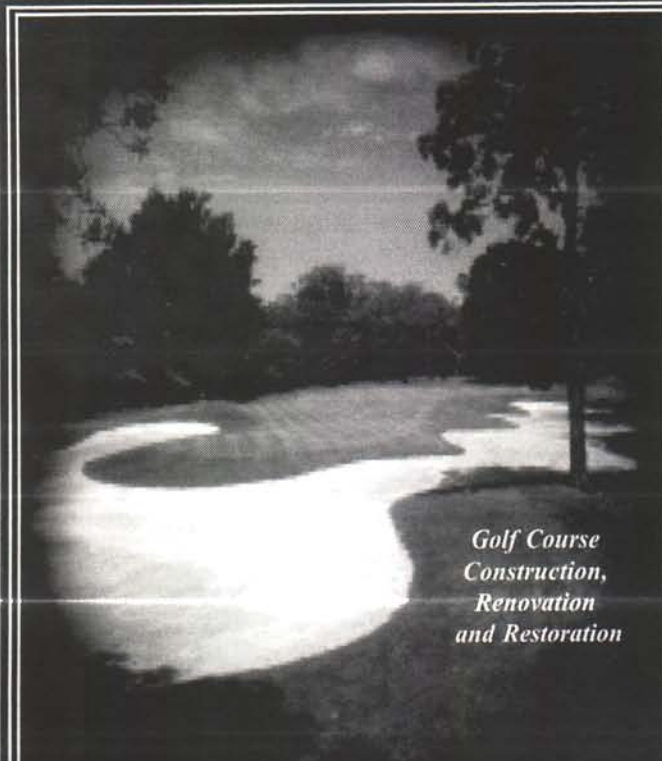
Golf course superintendents down here are dealing not only with their own problems . . but with possible labor organizing problems as well.

The advice from superintendents who have been involved with all of this highly recommend attacking problem areas - working conditions, worker training, better pay and enhancement of benefits, retention of quality people, and creating a positive environment for your employees, whether white or Hispanic.

Do not ignore or delay; do not let your organization ignore or delay any possible problem area. The unions just might come calling.

Hispanic employees are a very real and critical part of any golf course operation. Any intelligent superintendent/manager realizes that his/her success is partially due to one's employees. Looking out for their welfare as much as possible is not only good business... it is the right and human thing to do.

Hopefully, if superintendents faithfully do that, others in the golf course world will take note, appreciate hard work and consistent results and not be so quick to pull the plug when people run into problems. It is the least that we should be able to expect. ♻



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