



Unionization

Whether or not a union is in your best interest depends on several factors for both employer and employee.

by Richard I. Lehr

Unions are not evil.

Some employers have had pleasant, successful working relationships with unions. But, unless an employer is willing to accept the possibility of strikes, boycotts, picketing and, in essence, having the union become a business partner, it is generally advisable to stay union-free.

Unions do not strike most of the time, but an employer never knows whether or not the union he has will be an aggressive, strike-oriented union. Many unions are reasonable to deal with, but an employer has no idea whether or not the union he may end up with will be reasonable or unreasonable. These uncertainties have led most non-union employers to prefer remaining non-union.

Size no concern

Many turf industry employers may regard themselves as too small to be a target for union activity.

Who would want to represent three or five employees? Eighty percent of all union elections are held in small groups, those of 50 employees or less. And though unions may not target these small employers, most union activity occurs because a current employee initiates the contact

with the union. Thus, if a green industry employer is thinking he is immune from union activity because of his size and that a union would not want to fool with such a small employer, he should remember that a union may not contact him, but a disenchanted employee may contact the union. The employer then has a serious problem.

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Why unionize?

The reasons for unionization vary from company to company -- so should the approach for preventing unionization. The reasons for most successful unionizations can usually be broken down into:

1 Unreasonable Working Conditions - This is particularly troublesome in the Green Industry in the summer, when most employees must work long hours during hot days. An employer who does not recognize the efforts by employees during such times and express his appreciation for their work, whether it be through

bonuses, another compensation program, or simply communicating that expression verbally, may find that discontent is rising because tempers are short and working conditions are uncomfortable.

2 Favoritism - Employees who perceive that one individual is treated better than they for reasons unrelated to their job performance, skill or seniority may be attracted to the seniority system and grievance procedure offered by a union. Because many green industry employers are family-owned and managed operations, those employers need to be particularly sensitive about avoiding overt, preferred treatment for family members.

3 Concern for Employees as Individuals and Prompt Response to Employee Problems - The recent economic troubles of our country have heightened individuals' insecurity about their jobs and themselves. Additionally, in many households, it has complicated existing financial or domestic problems.

An employer who knows his employees as individuals can be useful in at least providing a forum for the employees to discuss personnel or business-related problems, even if the employer does not have the answers. Furthermore, this type of relationship promotes a sense of belonging, which is important

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to most individuals. If an employee does not feel he belongs with the employer or is part of the company and team, perhaps he would feel that he could become part of something if he joined a labor union.

4 Wages and Benefits - These are issues that always arise in a situation where employees may want a union. Each employer should be sure that his wages and benefits are competitive with the industry and his geographical vicinity. Furthermore, because many employers in the Green Industry pay employees on a fixed salary for a fluctuating work week plan, it is important that employees realize how these complicated pay systems operate, so that during the long, hot summer days, the employees do not feel that they are underpaid because they are not getting time-and-a-half or overtime.

Though pay raises nationally are averaging four to six percent in many industries, the key factor that employees are looking for is improved health and benefit programs. A six percent raise is certainly appreciated, but, if a health care program is not provided that protects the employee and his family against catastrophic medi-

Unionization Reasons

- Unreasonable working conditions
- Favoritism
- Concern for employees as individuals; prompt response to problems
- Wages and benefits
- Due process at work



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cal matters, that raise could be wiped out quickly. We generally advise employers to focus on improving the health and benefits package, because that ultimately is more meaningful to employees.

5 Due Process at Work - Most states permit employers to terminate an employee for any reason, whenever they choose.

Employees are concerned about whether an employer has a fair and impartial approach to matters such as employee discipline or termination. This would

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include counseling with an employee about unsatisfactory job performance that could result in discipline or termination, giving an employee a final warning that continued problems could result in termination, and affording the employee an opportunity to respond to the employer's statements. This response would be investigated by the employer before the employer made his final decision.

A union contract frequently contains a grievance and arbitration procedure, in addition to progressive disciplinary steps before an employee may be terminated. Modifying this structure is a good approach for promoting job security.

Last year, more than 2,500 employers in the U.S. who were non-union the year before, became unionized. Employers should disregard the obituaries written by many individuals about organized labor. Unionization will continue to be possible in the Green Industry unless each employer consciously decides to conduct employee relations such that employees believe they are being treated fairly in a non-union environment and do not need a union.

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