

Excerpts from *Why Unions Matter* by Michael D. Yates

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In this era of corporate downsizing and plant closing it is a rare worker who has not faced job loss.

[A union] would force the company, so long accustomed to seeing its employees as simply costs of production, to treat workers as human beings, with the respect that all people deserve.

Most people in the United States are workers.

We have a capitalist economic system which by its nature divides society into two classes: those who own the workplaces and those who work for them.

Almost every person who works for a living works for someone else.

If our employer decides to shut down the business, move it, or introduce labor-saving machinery, none of us acting alone can do anything about it.

If we are honest, we must admit that our employers have real power over us.

Sooner or later, however, most workers will draw the obvious conclusion: if they stick together with their fellow workers, they can change things.

The understanding that workers, as individuals, are powerless leads toward recognition that they share this powerlessness with others.

Workers make low wages not because the market dictates that this be so but because they are not powerful enough to make their employers pay them more.

A fundamental goal of a union is to change the relationship between labor and management.

What a union does is give workers a “voice” in their workplaces, a way to put themselves on a more equal footing with their employers.

A worker standing alone is a worker in trouble.

For every Michael Jordan, whose amazing talent gives him tremendous power, there are millions of the rest of us, eminently replaceable.

(over)

While it is true that many unions are not as democratic as they should be, there is no doubt that unions, especially at the local level, are among the most democratic institutions in the country.

Unions are organizations which workers have formed voluntarily and in such a way that they, the members, have or can exert real power.

There are no unions in which democracy is completely absent.

A union formally recognized by the employer, either because of an election or voluntarily by the employer, has the right to negotiate with the employer, and the employer has an obligation to do so.

The National Labor Relations Act requires the employer to bargain in “good faith.”

The process of reaching an agreement with an employer, of arriving at a written collective bargaining agreement or contract, is difficult.

Two important and controversial parts of most agreements today are management rights and no-strike clauses.

The essence of management is control; a good collective bargaining agreement limits this control, in significant ways, while bad one allows the management to retain much of what it already had.

It is a rare contract that does not have a *no-strike* agreement in it.

Collective bargaining cannot eliminate the uncertainty inherent in our economic system.

Those few who own most of our workplaces have taken great pains to economize on the use of labor and to maximize the number of people who can do any given job.

The effect of these actions is to create a “reserve army of labor,” a pool of potential workers whose function is to reduce wages (lowering the price of labor by increasing the “supply”) and increase the insecurity of those who are currently employed.

Employers, while in ruthless competition with one another, are well organized to protect the interests of their entire class.

Needless to say, employers find it in their interest to exacerbate feelings of difference that reduce the likelihood of groups joining together against them.

SOURCE: Michael D. Yates, *Why Unions Matter* (Monthly Review Press, New York), 1988, pages 4, 5, 8, 10, 13, 18-19, 20, 23, 39, 40, 53, 72, 75, 81, 82, 104.

