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Labor-Management Cooperation

Abstract
[Excerpt] In analyzing labor-management cooperation, it is important to be clear on what it is not. It is not an absence of strikes or conflict. Cooperation is not synonymous with industrial peace. Cooperation may take place even when bargaining leads to work stoppages; conversely, the mere absence of strikes is no evidence that there is labor-management cooperation. In the current period, there is a tendency to equate concessionary bargaining with labor-management cooperation. Demand for and acceptance of "givebacks" reflect economic pressures and relative bargaining strength and ought not to be interpreted as evidence of a cooperative relationship.

Keywords
ILR, Cornell University, labor, management, cooperation, industrial, peace, work stoppage, strike, givebacks, economic, relationship

Comments
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COMMENTARY

LABOR-MANAGEMENT COOPERATION

Lois S. Gray

In analyzing labor-management cooperation, it is important to be clear on what it is not. It is *not* an absence of strikes or conflict. Cooperation is not synonymous with industrial peace. Cooperation may take place even when bargaining leads to work stoppages; conversely, the mere absence of strikes is no evidence that there is labor-management cooperation. In the current period, there is a tendency to equate concessionary bargaining with labor-management cooperation. Demand for and acceptance of "givebacks" reflect economic pressures and relative bargaining strength and ought not to be interpreted as evidence of a cooperative relationship.

Labor-management cooperation . . . is not a new, or even a recent, development on the American labor relations scene.

In the past, as well as the present, the major impetus to labor-management cooperation has been the perception of a common enemy. During the two World Wars, the enemies were foreign powers and cooperation was spurred by patriotism. The current period also features foreign powers as the enemies, but the battleground has shifted to international trade. Strengthening the competitive position of American industry vis à vis Japan and Western Europe is encouraging cooperation in steel, auto, and the garment industries.

Nonunion employers, the common enemy to the unionized sector, were the dominant cause of labor-management cooperation in the 1920s and 1930s and continue today to bring unions and unionized employers together in such industries as construction and apparel.

Economic dislocation is another powerful impetus to cooperation, caused by technological and organizational changes and shifts in government policies. For example, the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, faced with a court order for divestiture and drastic reorganization, has been engaged in joint planning with the Communication Workers of America involving employees at all levels of the organization. Railroads, which since World War II have lost two-thirds of their work force as a result of technological change and competition with other forms of transportation, are beginning to experiment with "quality circles" in an effort to increase productivity, gain greater flexibility, and save jobs. Public employee unions confronted with fiscal crises have joined management in productivity committees and quality of work life (QWL) projects.

From "Labor-Management Cooperation: A Passing Fad or Permanent Change," a speech delivered at the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service and the National Association of Labor-Management Committees' National Labor-Management Conference held in Washington, D.C. in September 1982. The author is professor and associate dean at the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University.