

Workplace folly

Written by **LEE DUNN**

I've worked in a number of places that have had trade unions, and I know the unions have their purpose and are responsible for many of the advances and benefits that employees enjoy. I have been on strike several times, against different companies, am familiar with grievance procedures, have been on joint committees and have attended many union meetings. I've also been a supervisor in non union shops, and so I feel that I understand something of employee-management relations.

Much depends, of course, upon the people in authority, in the company and in the union, and the philosophy of each of these entities. I spent 13 years as a warehouse employee in a manufacturing plant that was unionized from the get go. The last six were in a solitary job as Storekeeper for parts and supplies within the plant. The store room was kept locked, and I handed out parts from a window to the general warehouse staff. Maintenance personnel and supervisors had keys, and were permitted to come in and sign out their own parts.

During my tenure there, I was witness to things that, by any yardstick, would be considered to be gross misconduct, if not criminal acts, that went almost unpunished. Machine sabotage, sleeping on the job, assaults, the concealment of substandard product, and theft. These were the acts of some of the unionized employees with whom I worked.

The company, for their part, were inconsistent in their disciplinary practices. Many of the worst offenders, after exhausting the grievance process, were let off with a warning when it became clear that their cases would go to costly mediation or legal proceedings. Some people who had committed lesser offences and were perhaps viewed as more co-operative, were given stiffer penalties because of the perception that they would not raise as much of a fuss. Result: poor morale, and disrespect for company policy.

I never informed on anyone directly, unless it involved the safety of others, and then I would talk to the offender personally before going to anyone else. That is, until I became storekeeper and was made responsible for the factory's parts inventory. We had to count the stockroom regularly, and, if there were any large variances, then it was on me.

The store room was only manned for 8 hours out of 24, and the rest of the time it was accessible to those who had keys. Missing stock became more and more of a problem, and so it was obvious that it was either being taken and used legitimately and not signed out, or was being stolen.

When the problem had worsened considerably, I sent an email to the company controller, with whom I had a reasonably good relationship. In it, I blamed either non-compliance with procedure or outright theft for the missing product. She became concerned, and responded positively to the email, and apparently then had a meeting with the union president about it. The next day, she did an about-face and basically said that, as there was no proof of these inflammatory accusations, I would just have to be more vigilant and develop better systems to prevent further loss. A week later, I received a registered letter from the union, stating that unless I withdrew the note I had sent, that I would be thrown out of the union, and, in essence, would be without a job.

I knew absolutely that there was theft going on, because I would count particularly valuable items, such as batteries, each and every day. They went missing much more quickly than anything else. I consulted with my lawyer, who said, in a nutshell, that the toothpaste was already out of the tube and I could not put it back in, so I might as well do some sort of a retraction and get on with life. So, I drafted a letter apologizing for offending anyone, with the explanation that it was done out of frustration for not being able to do my job properly. I fully expected this to be posted publicly by the union, but that did not happen. I was never officially informed of any excommunication, and stayed on in the job, with reduced enthusiasm and morale, until the next contract talks came around, and a strike was looming.

I will say that, of all the strikes I have participated in with various companies, most have been unprofitable and divisive for both parties. Sometimes, we were off the job for weeks or months, in the middle of winter, receiving a pittance in strike pay, and wound

up coming back to work for less than we had been offered at the start. This, together with the lost time and hardships, would take months, or longer, to make up. In the job of which I speak, the company of course knew well in advance that a strike was likely, and proceeded to build up a 'bank' of stock that they estimated would be enough to ride it out. This was accomplished with the co-operation of union members who wanted the extra overtime, for the same reasons. We were cutting our own throats.

I had many good relationships with both unionized and management employees within these companies, but the negative experiences have given me a jaundiced view of industrial relations, at least the ones within my experience.