

Communications in Strike Situations: Management's Rights & The Players Involved

Strikes are no longer private affairs. They cannot be confined to the principals. Their influence extends to the community.

Lost production, lost wages and lost profits can never be recovered. They are gone forever. With this recognition by the public, public opinion and public support have come to be a major factor to be considered in connection with a breakdown in labor relations.

WHY COMMUNICATE?

Labor union officials have been more alert to the increasing importance of good communications with the public than has been the case generally with management. Newspaper people, particularly, are disturbed by the fact that the tendency of management is to back away from publicity, resulting in the union side of the argument getting first and better coverage in most cases. In fact, there have been situations in which "management's" side of the story never did get told, with the result that the public in general (and very often the employees of the company itself) received a completely one-sided impression. To allow this to happen is to throw away a most useful potential ally that can result in misplaced indignation which often adds decisively to the total pressure on management.

Remember, the newspapers will print the story; an employer cannot suppress it. Therefore, it is better that the employer cooperate so that the story which they write is properly expressing the employer's viewpoint, policy and position.

Are You Ready?

NEEDLESS FEARS

Employers sometimes express the fear that publicity may weaken their position at the bargaining table. In most cases, this fear is groundless. Silence may hurt their position at the bargaining table rather than help it. The unions never hesitate to air their side of the story. Employers have the same rights as unions to talk to employees, unionized or not, and to express their views to the public.

MANAGEMENT HAS RIGHTS

A good many management people are laboring under the impression that their freedom of speech is extremely limited or curtailed. Some employers mistakenly feel that since their employees belong to the union they cannot talk to them, or shouldn't.

When a work stoppage develops, it immediately becomes a matter of public interest and concern. There are a large number of people who want the facts. They include the employees themselves, their families, stockholders, customers, suppliers, law enforcement agencies, transportation, and very often legislators and other public officials.

It should be the communications aim of the company to identify the company position with the best-interest of the employees, the company, and the general public in mind. This calls for quick and continuous action. It means frank and candid communications of the facts, which should include a forthright statement of the company's position.

WHO WANTS TO KNOW?

Whether or not employees belong to a union, they still feel that they have an inherent stake and interest in the business and they want to know what's going on. Most companies have some form of a continuous employee communications program, keeping employees advised regarding company opportunities, problems, products, markets, policy, etc. In the event of a work stoppage, this communications program provides a ready-made vehicle for company messages, hopefully even adding credibility for these pronouncements. This advantage should be alert to correct misstatements, omissions or misunderstandings as they arise.

If negotiations break down and a work stoppage results, one of the first things that should be done is to send a signed letter to each employee, giving the actual facts of the situation, including management's last offer and a fresh statement as to management's position relating to questions of policy and principles involved. This letter should be sent directly to the employee's homes. Remember the truism, "You don't employ a man or woman, you employ a family". Your message will be multiplied to the community by the exchange of "back fence" conversation.

Are You Ready?

If the stoppage is prolonged, any change in the situation should be immediately communicated to all employees by a similar letter.

YOUR CUSTOMER AND SUPPLIERS

These people, too, have a stake in our business. If they are “on your side”, they will exert a very effective force which will assist you in maintaining your position in the community. A personal letter may be the best method.

THE PUBLIC

The public can be reached best in two ways:

- Newspaper publicity, and
- Paid advertising

News stories written by qualified reporters are the best method of reaching the public, provided the company’s side is properly told. Daily newspaper advertisements have been very successful in some instances.

OTHERS

Depending on the situation and the people affected, it may be necessary to have personal conferences and/or correspondence to give full information to law enforcement agencies and legislative bodies.