

Globalization and Unions

In this issue, Lloyd dispels the belief that unions are not relevant in today's corporate culture, and looks at the methods unions are currently using to join forces with their international partners.

As leaders we all address the topic of globalization in ways that best suit our organizations. One item that seems to have slipped off the business agenda is the topic of unions - "they have gone away" ... "look at all the plant closures" ... "unions are not relevant today." These and similar comments are spoken by managers every day. While they are correct from one perspective (union membership is down and almost 500,000 North American jobs have been sent offshore), they are **WRONG IN A VERY IMPORTANT WAY.**

In our own backyard – Ontario – 2008 will see the signing of approximately 160 **new** Collective Agreements (Ontario Ministry of Labour). That means approximately 160 employers will sit down and negotiate a first agreement. My point: unions have not gone away. With over 30 years' experience keeping clients union-free (via Positive Employee Relations), I believe it would be unwise to think that unions are a thing of the past. Rather, they are re-inventing themselves. For example, we now have a new international union congress and a new North American federation. Information about these two organizations follows.

In November 2006, 1,700 delegates from 156 countries (including Canada and the US) met in Vienna for an event unprecedented in international trade union movement history. They dissolved two globally operating and competing international confederations and founded the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). This "union of unions" comprises 304 affiliated federations in 156 countries in which 168 million workers are organized around the world.

What can we take from this? *We are now seeing the globalization of unions.* For example, the biggest union in the United Kingdom, Unite, recently merged with one of the largest trade unions in the US, the United Steel Workers. While we have seen international networks of trade unions before – Union Network International, for example, boasts 15 million members worldwide through union affiliations – this is the first big intercontinental merger of its kind. The labour movement has taken a significant

step towards confronting what it sees as the evils of corporate globalization.

Unions will try to gain leverage in one country by exerting pressure in another, using lower labour rates in developing economies to drive strike action and wielding influence over corporate headquarters to change employment practices or prepare the ground for recognition.

Trade unions are already targeting large private-sector organizations' social responsibility statements and pointing to the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO) standards as the minimum benchmark for good employers around the world. ILO standards protect against child labour, promote safe working practices and refer to the right to join unions.

In 2005 the American Federation of Labour and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL/CIO) split after working together for 50 years. Following this, 7 major trade unions with over 6 million workers formed the Change to Win Federation (CTW). Its members have familiar names: International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT), Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA), Service Employees International Union (SEIU), United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC), United Farm Workers (UFW), United Food and Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), and UNITE HERE.

Hopefully this quick overview puts the question about unions in a different perspective for those who advocate that unions are a "thing of the past."

One final note: go to www.global-labour-university.org and link to *programme structure and credits*. Then think about how qualified your front-line supervisors and managers are to deal with organizers who have these graduates as their managers.

UNIONS ARE NOT INEVITABLE!© But we must always firm up our Human Resource Values. Treat employees as customers, and they'll never need a union.

Stay tuned for the next issue of Lloyd's newsletter.1.

Questions? Comments? Contact Lloyd with your feedback. 

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