Worker Representation and Participation Survey: First Report

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...Understanding what employees want is vital to fashioning effective labor policies in an era when new technologies and forms of work organization demand change from both workers and managers and national labor institutions are themselves changing. The characteristics of jobs and the demography of the work force differ from what they were decades ago when the U.S. established its labor relations system. Private-sector unions are in decline. Many firms are experimenting with employee involvement programs. Government regulation of the workplace has dramatically increased without parallel capacities to monitor and enforce the new laws. If these sorts of changes motivate a reconsideration of our national labor policies, they also underscore the need to hear directly from American workers about how they think the current system is performing.

The Worker Representation and Participation Survey (WRPS)...at its core seeks answers to three big questions: (1) Do employees want greater participation and representation at their workplace than is currently provided? (2) What do employees see as essential to attaining their desired level of participation and representation? (3) What solutions do employees favor to resolve any gap between their desired participation/representation and what they currently have?

Despite popular discussion about the end of long-term jobs and careers, the vast majority of employees are sufficiently tied and loyal to their firm to have reasons to want to participate in workplace decisions....At the same time, many employees are concerned about the quality of labor-management relations at their firm or organization, and with their job situation, and are both worried about their future and not confident they can trust management with it....Many feel a need to deal with management as a group.

(Continued on page 2)

The Premature Obituary

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(The following material was excerpted from a Newsday Viewpoint piece (1/12/95) with permission of the authors.)

The press has declared the end of the labor movement. It has reported on a new study by Freeman and Rogers which suggests that American workers would prefer cooperative relationships with management over traditional labor unions. Coupled with union membership at less than 16% of the work force and a new wave of far from pro-labor Republicans in Washington, many see this as definitive proof of labor’s obsolescence. A more careful analysis, however, reveals that this is far from the truth.

It should be no surprise given the almost complete encroachment on the legal rights of workers and unions—where workers are fired in one out of every four union elections for pursuing their legal right—that many no longer see unions as a viable means for achieving a voice in the workplace. No wonder the study found that workers grasp at any opportunity for input offered by management that doesn’t involve a fight or threat to their job. Yet it is a leap for faith to assume that this increased interest in cooperation is of the same order that trade unionism was for workers a generation ago—and a genuine replacement for it.

What Freeman and Rogers have identified is not a new social movement about to burst forth on the scene. Instead they have captured the quiet mass resignation of American workers to a system that robs them of any hope for real power on the job. When the UAW or Miners Union were born, they represented something very fundamental for workers and their families. They were a path out of poverty, out of the sweatshop....Talk to workers in working class bars, shopping malls or city offices today. There is no mass movement out there for TQM, QC, or whatever is the latest labor-management scheme. There are no rallies, no demonstrations, no passion for these programs.

If [Freeman and Rogers] had polled workers in the 1920s, the findings [might] have been very similar. Workers’ orga.
Worker Representation

(Continued from page 1)

[In response to question one above,] employees want greater participation and representation at their workplace than they have. For all age, sex, race, occupation, education, and earnings groups, there is a representation/participation gap between what employees believe they can contribute at the workplace and what current work organizations allow them to do. . . . The vast majority of employees want more involvement and greater say in company decisions affecting their workplace. They believe increased influence will not only give them greater job satisfaction, but also improve the competitive performance of companies and the performance of existing human resource programs. . . . Most employees welcome the adoption of “employee involvement” (EI) programs and other policies emphasizing employee “empowerment” and management accessibility to employee voice. But they do not believe these programs have gone far enough to encourage worker participation and think their effectiveness would improve with more of it. . . . In short, most employees want more say in how their companies are run and how key decisions affecting them are made. They want more say as a group and believe greater worker involvement in firm decision making is good for the company as well as for them.

[In response to question two,] employees see management acceptance and cooperation as the key to the success of the employee organization and workplace practices needed to close the representation/participation gap. [M]Management reluctance . . . has a general aspect and special applicability to employees wishing to form unions . . . In nonunion companies, 66% of non-managerial workers believe management would oppose a union drive either through information campaigns . . . or harassment and threats; 3% thought management would welcome the effort.

Our third question. . . is the most difficult to answer, [but we believe from the various approaches we used,] an answer does emerge. To deal with workplace issues and give employees greater say in enterprise decision making, most employees want cooperative joint committees with some independent standing inside their companies, and many want unions or union-like organizations. . . . With respect to unions, a substantial minority of employees—several times the current level of union membership—want to join them. . . . Thirty-two percent of nonunion, nonmanagerial employees would vote for a union “if an election were held today.” . . . Among current union members, 90% would vote to keep their union if a new election were held today. Overall, then, 40% of respondents reported that they would vote union in an election, and 40% reported that most workers at their workplace would vote union. . . . Given a choice between “laws that protect the rights of individual employees,” “joint employee and management committees that discuss problems,” and “unions” or “employee organizations that negotiate or bargain with management over issues,” and asked to choose which ones they thought would most effectively “increase employees’ say in the workplace and make sure they are treated fairly,” the majority of employees prefer joint committees; union or union-like organizations came in second place, and more legal protections third.

Asked to consider [the criteria for another kind of employee organization] if a union was not available, [a plurality of] nonmanagerial employees chose an organization: (1) run jointly by employees and management; (2) in which, in cases of conflict, final decisions are made by an outside arbitrator; (3) with access to confidential company information; (4) in which employee representatives are elected; (5) composed of similarly situated workers; and (6) drawing on company budget and staff.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the WRPS shows that most American employees want more involvement and greater say in their jobs. Many—sometimes a clear majority, sometimes a large majority—also want some form of workplace organization or policy that provides them with group as well as individual voice. Employees wish such organization or policy to give them independent input into workplace decisions. A sizable minority wants union or union-like organizations; the majority, favoring joint consultative committees, wants to be able to select their representatives to such committees.

At the same time, virtually all employees—including union members and those interested in joining unions—strongly prefer cooperative relations with management to conflictual ones and are acutely sensitive to the need for management acceptance of representation and participation organizations or policies if those are to work. There are areas of agreement between employees and managers about how to close America’s representation and participation gap. But there are also differences between employees and managers about the best form of workplace organizations—differences about the appropriate division of power and authority within the firm.

Premature Obituary

(Continued from page 1)

izations had been rendered powerless by the law. With few other options, many participated in the company unions that were the equivalent of today’s employee involvement programs. Yet, like today, these employee representation plans did not embody the hopes and dreams for workers and their families. As soon as the social and political climate changed in the 1930s, the Congress of Industrial Organizations burst forth with a level of mass organization unheard of among American workers.

We must be careful not to write off the labor movement in this country. Ironically, while Freeman and Rogers failed to note its significance, they found that close to half of American workers, despite the odds, still continue to believe in unions and the possibility of real power in the workplace. We cannot ignore the 2,000 textile workers at Tultex Corporation in North Carolina, several thousand health care workers at Providence Hospital, or tens of thousands of janitors in Los Angeles. In the last few years, theses workers put their livelihoods. . . on the line to organize a union and win. Nor can we ignore the fact that the labor movement actually grew this year for the first time in a decade.

(Continued on page 4)