

Unions Hashing It Out With Hashtags

Organized labor is getting with the times by using social media to communicate with its membership, and a recent NLRB ruling offers more social possibilities.

In 1981, MTV debuted with the self-prophesizing “Video Killed the Radio Star” by the now long-forgotten Buggles.

Fax machines were only starting to become ubiquitous in offices. The first commercially available mobile phone — no text, no email and no Internet — was still two years away. And a typical warehouse had a large bank of payphones for employees to use during break times.

Union prevalence in the U.S. workforce was 23 percent. A typical union campaign started with underground, word-of-mouth organizing and progressed to organizers passing out fliers at the gate. Personal contact was at regular off-site meetings at a union hall, motel or bowling alley, with home visits to holdouts once the Excelsior list of names and addresses was produced. An employer had advantages of employee access, resources and time.

By 2006, the union membership percentage of the U.S. workforce was down to 12 percent. Half of the developed world was online. Facebook was 2 years old, and Twitter was recently born. A year later, the first iPhone was introduced and now more than 60 percent of the U.S. adult population has a smartphone capable of text, email and social media — 24/7 access to information and communication wherever they are.

Labor unions have noticed. All significant international unions, and a large number of locals, have websites that broadcast information, news and union contacts to employees in an easily accessible format. Employees now have access to polished, sophisticated content and plenty of video. Go to any large union website — cwa-union.org, liuna.org, teamsters.org, seiu.org, uaw.org, ufcw.org or orusw.org. Many unions publicly draw up a road map example to start an organizing campaign even before employees contact the union for help.

Once a campaign is public, it is increasingly likely a Facebook page or other website will appear devoted to the organizing effort. Organizers increasingly communicate through large group emails or texts and even Twitter feeds.

There is no need to wait for meetings and in-house organizing committee members to get to a payphone at break time to get direction from the professional organizer. If supervisors pass out company materials on one side of the plant, it is likely that a picture will be taken and sent to the organizer and a set of questions or talking points returned by the time they get to the other side of the plant. Simply put, the old employer advantages are disappearing.

What has been the effect? Unions have won more than 60 percent of elections that have gone to a vote in the past 10 years. But, despite an uptick in 2007 and 2008, union membership has continued to decline and now stands at 11.3 percent of the workforce.

In this context, the National Labor Relations Board has jumped into the fray. The NLRB proposed new election rules in April 2014 that call for an expedited process for holding elections that may leave as little as 10 to 14 days between the filing of a union petition and a vote. Employers will have little time after a petition is filed to share information with employees about the potential risks and downsides associated with unions.

Also buried in the proposed rules is a new requirement that employers would provide employee phone numbers and email addresses once a petition is filed. This will give unions ready access to broadcast electronic information at all hours of the day, including work time and in the workplace (both of which employers could once upon a time feel comfortable that they controlled). And that says nothing of the fact that a greater portion of the workforce is accepting of communication via electronic and social media as millennials enter and the baby boomers retire from the American workforce.

In this changing world, there is a need to look at employee relations and union prevention initiatives in a new light. Employers will need to be more accepting of communicating through technology, understand the effect of generational change, and place a premium on creating inclusive, engaged and fulfilling workplace environments where employees see little need to bring in third parties.