



Don't third-party THE union... make OUR UNION stronger

 thestand.org/2014/04/dont-third-party-the-union-make-our-union-stronger/

David Groves

April 17, 2014

(April 17, 2014) — When was the last time you heard someone ask, “What does the union do for me?”

Pretty recently, I would bet and, if you're like me, it's not a question that makes you feel good about being a union supporter. If that question rubs you the wrong way, there's a good reason for it. Think about what that question assumes:



- 1) The role of a union is to *do things for members*.
- 2) Members judge their union based on what it does for them *as individuals*.
- 3) **Most importantly!** THE union is an outside organization. It isn't the employer, but isn't the workers either. It's a third party in the employment relationship.

This is called “third-partying the union” and it's something that employers love to do. Especially when workers are trying to form a new union, employers will talk about how THE union will make it impossible for workers and employers to speak to each other directly; how THE union just wants to take dues money from workers but can't really help them; and how THE union is really just made up of a bunch of self-interested fat cats who want to support their lavish life styles. Sound familiar?

Here's the rub. When we let *union members* talk about THE union, we're going along with how employers see unions. We're letting union members “third party” their own unions!

And what gets ignored? How about the fact that unions are democratic organizations where being a member means having a voice? How about the fact that unions are the only organizations that give workers equality with the employer in negotiation and enforcement of terms and conditions of employment? How about the fact that unions are often helping organizations that put on food drives and build wheelchair ramps? There are so many ways

in which unions are supporting the quality of working people's lives in some obvious, and some more subtle ways, but you'd never know it when you start hearing people talking about THE union.

So how do we get out of the trap of "third partying" THE union?

Well, first of all, let's talk about replacing the article with a pronoun. It's not THE union — it's OUR UNION. This simple shift in language shrinks the distance between the people and the organization. The members are their unions and we should use language that reflects that.

Second, let's think about analogies. One of the worst analogies for a union is the insurance company. What image does that conjure up? It's a for-profit business that's taking people's money, whether there's a problem or not, and might or might not be there to help if something goes wrong. Who trusts an insurance company? In the relationship between you and your doctor, who gets to decide whether the care that you and your doctor both believe you need is going to get paid for? The insurance company! When you get in to an auto accident, who gets to decide whether you will come through it OK, or end up in bankruptcy without a car? The insurance company!

Why would we want our unions to be thought about in this way? Union contracts are not insurance policies and union dues are not insurance premiums. If you let people think this way, why shouldn't they ask you, "What has THE union done for me lately?" (That's a question I'd like to ask about every insurance company!)

Then what happens when you ask them to step up and be active in support of their union? I bet a reply you would recognize goes, "Isn't that what I pay my dues for, so someone else will do this for me?" And why shouldn't they ask that if they are looking at union representatives and staff as insurance agents? That's no way to build a strong, worker-led, democratic organization.

Here's an alternative analogy for you — the gym membership. You can pay your gym membership month-in and month-out, but if you don't work out, it's not going to do a damn thing for you.

We need active union members who are building powerful collective bodies and minds. We need workers who claim their unions as positive and influential organizations in their lives and their communities — and commit to fixing them when they don't work the way they should.

We don't need THE union — THAT corrupt, ineffectual, politically motivated, out-of-touch organization that just takes our money. We need OUR UNIONS — healthy, strong, and ready to win!

Sarah Laslett is Director of the Washington State Labor Education and Research Center at South Seattle College. Her column — “A Working Education” — is a regular feature of The Stand. Learn more about the Labor Center here.