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INFORMATION

IT WOULD be technically possible to provide in a collective-bargaining agreement that all information which may be supplied to employees, by the employer, must go through the union which is the designated bargaining agent of the employees. Probably no such clause has ever been actually written or seriously proposed. But the administration of the National Labor Relations Act sometimes extended almost to this practical result. It was held to be an "unfair labor practice" for an employer, during negotiations, to write to employees as individuals, telling them what he had said to their bargaining representatives. No one should be surprised if this specific demand to be the exclusive channel of information is presented by some union in the future.

The provision of the Taft-Hartley Act which redefines the right of employers to their basic freedom of speech should never have been necessary as a correction of the Wagner Act. It was urgently needed as a directive to some of the administrators. It was a healthy reminder to some union leaders that their bargaining power is not and cannot be great enough to infringe upon the freedom of speech of the employer. However, employers as a class should not enjoy too much righteous indignation over this unrighteous activity of some unions aided by some government agents in the pre-Taft-Hartley days. Neither should they be too jubilant over the 1947 amendment or restatement. Considerable history can be written about the private pre-Wagner activities of some employers to curb the freedom of speech of union organizers and advocates. Those activities may be rationalized in terms of the dangerous threat to the particular business and the whole Ameri-

can system which was carried by the speeches which those advocates wanted to make. All in all, the main difference between the early interference with freedom of speech by some employers, and the later interference by some unions, was the fact that the unions had more government help.

Those of us who have complete faith in the practice of sharing information with employees, and equal faith in the value of collective bargaining, might seem inconsistent in warning against channeling all information through the collective bargaining agent. A closer look will help to identify the best friends of collective bargaining as those who emphasize that this is a field in which collective bargaining is not enough.

No exclusive channel of information is a safe device in a society which is committed to freedom in general, as well as to freedom of speech. A Soviet spokesman might declare that the Russians are the best informed people in the world. He might even believe it, if that is important. He might back up his statement with a description of the thoroughness with which the Soviet Union keeps its people posted, tells them everything, by means of press and radio. He might point out the amazing achievement of converting the great mass of the Russian people from illiteracy to a condition of general literacy in one generation. The only fault with his statement that the Soviet tells its people everything is that "everything" means "everything we want them to know."

Probably the Hitler Nazis did an even better job than the Soviets are doing, in using their nearly complete control of information. The Nazis were dealing with a people already highly literate and intelligent. They could not be so effective in telling the Germans only what Hitler wanted them to know. They had to tell the Germans practically everything, but tell it in such a way as to produce the desired result. Censorship of the press will not usually result in keeping many news items out of print. It will result in creating a particular impression through the way the news is told.

In one of his greatest contributions to our thinking on industrial relations, Sumner Slichter has emphasized the function of information. Speaking of a group whose members "accept the basic political ideas and institutions of liberal Capitalism," he says:

They trust individuals to develop their own ideals and to select their own ends, and they believe that civil rights should protect individuals in the opportunity to acquire information, to hear the views of others, and to express their views. . . . Communism does not trust individuals to develop their own ideals and to select their own ends; it does not protect them with civil rights.⁴

It happens that the collective bargaining agent, the local union, its officers and committees, offers one of the best possible channels for conveying information to employees. The employer who fails to welcome the union as a channel of information is injuring himself both directly and indirectly. He is inviting a lack of confidence in all the information he shares with his employees through other channels. He creates the suspicion that his facts will not stand up under examination by the union representatives. He provides reason for ill will and resentment on the part of the union officers whom he tries to by-pass. He practically forces the union to go into the information business on its own, and to depend on sources which are sure to supply information which is less comprehensive, less accurate, and less specific. In a broad sense he has missed an opportunity to act in harmony with the pattern of economic democracy drawn by Dr. Slichter, the pattern which "protects individuals in the opportunity to acquire information, to hear the views of others, and to express their views."

The employer who sincerely believes that a free flow of information is desirable will look beyond the immediate effect of any particular piece of information. He will think in

⁴ Sumner H. Slichter, *The Challenge of Industrial Relations*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1947.

terms of the long-range development of men and women as intelligent employees, and especially as intelligent citizens. As far as his own employees are concerned, he will not attempt to channel information exclusively through any agency which he controls. That would be a denial of his basic belief in the value of individuals having "the opportunity to acquire information." His own exclusive agency would inevitably put its own mark and the employer's own mark, on the information which it transmits. This does not suggest that the information would be censored and selected as to content, or misrepresented, or distorted. Any agency transmitting information is sure to apply emphasis, which in itself influences the reactions of the one who receives the information.

The employer who sincerely wants his employees to have information and to use it intelligently will actively want them to get their information through every possible channel. He will never attempt to exclude the union from possession of any information which he shares with his employees. He will never attempt to censor the activities of the union officers in their efforts to transmit information to employees, through their own channels, with their own emphasis, or even with their own coloring. He will not belittle the intelligence of his employees, or indicate that he does not "trust individuals to develop their own ideals and to select their own ends." By a minimum standard of consistency and integrity, he must welcome any channel which conveys information to employees. But by the same standard, he will distrust and oppose any exclusive agency for this purpose, whether it be his own agency, or that of the union.

Collective bargaining cannot do the job of keeping employees informed. It cannot do that job, even in the interest of the union itself. The information which the union officers need, to administer a collective bargaining relationship effectively, cannot come to them entirely from outside sources. They may draw upon international union headquarters, offi-

cial research agencies of their union or its federation, or any other official source, for a great deal of what they need. Through these channels they can obtain data on general economic conditions and on their particular industry, analyses of comparable wage rates, living costs, product prices, and corporation profits. They can obtain information about new gains and privileges in recent agreements negotiated elsewhere, and on ways to protect themselves under new laws.

But in addition to all this they need a vastly greater amount of information about conditions and activities within the company and the plant itself. They need to know about changes in processes and products, new policies, new personnel, new construction and equipment. They need to know about extension or contraction of working schedules, expansion or reduction of the working force. It is highly desirable that they receive this information firsthand from the management of the plant or company with which they bargain collectively. But it is also important that they receive it secondhand through their own members. Through these members, the union officers can learn whether or not the company statement on a certain new policy checks with the actual operation of the policy in the plant. They can learn the frank reaction of their members to the information itself, and to the changes which occur from day to day within the plant. They need the outside supply of selected and usually highly colored information. They need the direct supply of information from the management. They also need the indirect, confirming supply of information through their own members in the plant.

Most collective bargaining agreements require the employer to provide a bulletin board for the exclusive use of the union officers. This bulletin board is a tool through which the union officers may convey information to their members, the employees in the particular plant. Many contracts restrict the use of the bulletin board to official union announce-

ments, but this restriction is seldom expected to be effective. The bill of fare of a famous eating house was printed in the Congressional Record, under the guise of an address, or "remarks," by a member of the House. Obviously, the president of a local union could make an official union bulletin out of the quotation of a speech by a Congressman. Collective bargaining cannot be effective in any attempt to censor the material which appears on the union bulletin board.

It is equally true that collective bargaining cannot be effective in restricting the information which the employer may place upon his own bulletin board. It does not restrict the information which he attempts to convey to his employees by any other means. Unfortunately, it can do very little to insure that any information, either from the employer or from the union, will actually reach the minds of employees. The task of sharing information with employees, of promoting intelligence and understanding within the organization, is beyond the scope of collective bargaining. There is actually a responsibility resting upon both employers and unions to guard against any interference with the flow of information, to avoid any form of restriction or censorship, which might be created by collective bargaining machinery.

Since the problem of information for employees goes far beyond the field of collective bargaining, it is urgently necessary for employers to accept their responsibility in this field. This task must be approached with certain requirements in mind. All the methods for conveying information must be such that they are in harmony with the collective bargaining relationship. The sharing of information with employees must not be degraded into an effort to weaken the union leadership or to destroy the collective bargaining relationship. The methods must not only be in harmony with that relationship, but they must recognize the bargaining agency as one of the natural channels for information. They must be designed so as to avoid any attempt at exclusive control, either of the

sources or channels of information. They must avoid the danger of providing conclusions and opinions to employees; in other words, they must emphasize and implement the faith that individuals can and will "develop their own ideals and . . . select their own ends."

A lengthy discussion of this general subject has been made in another volume.⁵ No attempt will be made here to review the various techniques and to evaluate their effectiveness, nor to restate the problems of human reaction to various types of information conveyed in various ways, nor to explore the types of information which should be shared with employees. The effort of this chapter is to emphasize the task of conveying information as one which cannot be handed over to even the best possible collective bargaining machinery, and one which can and must be accomplished when the collective bargaining relationship is not good.

One aspect of the job of sharing information with employees which has been strongly emphasized, and which needs emphasis forever, is the importance of the line supervisor. A definite injury has been done to the efficiency of the plant organization when important information reaches the employee group before it reaches the line supervisor. A collective bargaining relationship increases the importance of this aspect. One result of the labor agreement is that the foreman or supervisor has been pushed to one side in the development of the basic employer-employee dealings. The contract between top management and rank-and-file workers has been made without participation by the foreman—in most cases, without even advice from the foreman. If he is to retain his essential place as the leader of the group, it becomes more important than ever that he be kept ahead of that group in the possession of information.

Collective bargaining does nothing positively to help a

⁵ Alexander R. Heron, *Sharing Information with Employees*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1942.

line supervisor to keep himself informed. It does nothing to help top management in the provision of information for line supervisors. It gives added importance to management's need for an informed and understanding supervisory staff.

Particularly where a collective bargaining relationship exists, management must be almost passionately committed to a belief in the importance of keeping its line supervisors informed. It must be aggressive in finding logical, reliable, continuous methods for conveying information to them. It must expand any past concept of the scope of subject matter on which they should be posted. It must open up to line supervisors some information which was previously restricted to such a limited group as the board of directors, the general manager, and the payroll clerk. In doing all this, management must hold to an absolute minimum the machinery which is specially designed for conveying information to supervisors. It must find a natural process for conveying this information in the contacts and methods which are parts of the daily activities of actual supervision.

Management has been very sensitive about any invasion of its relations with line supervisors, which has been attempted by collective bargaining agencies. It should be correspondingly alert to maintain the management character and attitude of its supervisory group, by keeping that group intimately informed. The whole problem is one which is practically and theoretically beyond the scope of collective bargaining, and one which management wants to keep beyond that scope.

There is a wide area of information which should be in the minds of employees, in order to make their daily tasks interesting and significant. This area is not limited to information about the tasks themselves. In fact, it is chiefly concerned with matters outside those tasks. The significance of the job of tightening the nuts on certain bolts is found in the function which those bolts perform in assuring stability of

the truck body. The significance and importance of that stability can be appreciated only by some knowledge of the varied or specific uses to which the trucks will be put: duties in connection with road building in the desert or on the Alaskan Highway, delivery of the extremely heavy pieces of electrical equipment to the Grand Coulee power plant, moving huge quantities of fill material for the new breakwater on the Gulf Coast.

There are probably hundreds of ways in which information of this kind can be conveyed to employees, in different working situations. In some plants, the worker who performs a very minute and specialized operation can be given a personal view of the completed product, and shown where his monotonous performance has found an essential place in the assembly. Employees from some plants can be taken out to see how the customer uses the product to which they have contributed. Others may be shown a film with motion, sound, and color, photographed in Arabia or Australia, and revealing the finished product at work. Sometimes they can be given facsimile reproductions of letters from farmers in India who are using the implements manufactured here. They may have a chance to listen to an engineer who has just returned from South America where he has spent two years searching for supplies of wood suitable to the processes upon which these workers are engaged.

The neglect of using this kind of information, to make the daily job significant, brings the inevitable penalty of lack of understanding, lack of interest, lack of productivity, and the secondary crop of boredom and discontent. It is only one natural further step to the acceptance of some kind of activity which will relieve the boredom and also provide self-expression. Sometimes that activity acquires the name of labor trouble.

Collective bargaining does not relieve the employer of the responsibility for developing an internal program of telling

and showing his employees why their work is important, and helping them to see that it is significant and, therefore, interesting. This is one of the responsibilities of intelligent management which is beyond the scope of collective bargaining. It carries this promise of compensation, however: If the job is well done, if the employee group acquires this particular form of understanding, the collective bargaining process itself will incline to be constructive and intelligent, rather than destructive and emotional.

There is another type of information which is usually so completely and effectively supplied that its nature, as subject matter of the communications line, is likely to be forgotten. No matter what the problems or the policies of any management may be, in the field of employee relations, that management usually does an effective job in telling employees what they must know in order to perform their daily tasks. Millions of times in every business day, information of this kind is passed through the line organization. The salesman obtains the customer's order and specifications. In a large organization, information goes to the cost desk, the credit desk, the material and supply control desk, the machine program desk, the quality inspector, the packing, shipping, and traffic desks. In each operating unit a foreman and subforeman are passing on specific information as to what tools, materials, colors, or chemicals are to be used; what types of mechanical finish, what tolerances are required; what schedule dates for the completion of parts or processes must be met.

Almost as frequently, employees are being given information about their individual earnings, payroll deductions, work assignments, transfers, or promotions. They receive information about changes in time clock numbers, assignment of a locker in the new locker room, changes in working schedules, vacation periods, new prices in the cafeteria, or the opening of the new smoking area.

Such information as this must be effectively conveyed or the daily work would simply not be done in the average factory, store, or office. Without exception, any successful enterprise has established its lines of communication, well enough to convey this information. It has laid its cables, set up its pole lines, strung its wires, attached its transmitters and receivers. Too often the same management has overlooked the obvious usefulness of these same wires, this same line, to communicate other items. It has overlooked the parallel use of coaxial cables and phantom circuits in our commercial systems of communications. It has neglected to use "the line" for all kinds of information, because "the line" was set up primarily to transmit orders. But "the line" does its job of transmitting orders, and does it well.

We all know that management succeeds in passing on this type of information concerning today's work and how to do it. But we do not know whether even this information is passed on in such a way as to improve the employee relations or the opposite. Even though this particular body of information reaches employees in the form of instructions or orders, it affords a vehicle for carrying impressions, attitudes, and other collateral information. The manner of announcing the new locker room or the holiday shut-down is the decisive factor in deciding whether the reaction is constructive or not. The extra minute and the extra thought, in delivering the specification to the lathe man, can let him know the new and important use the customer has in mind, which makes him so particular about the finish and tolerances.

Many of these items of daily information dealing with work and conduct are definitely related to the collective bargaining process. This is likely to be true of any information or instruction affecting transfers, promotions, working schedules, and similar items. Therefore, both the information and the manner of conveying it must give due regard to the contract terms. It is a rare or unknown thing for the contract to

deal with ordinary problems of delivery schedules, order specifications on size, color, materials, or qualities. But almost any such item can become involved in the collective bargaining machinery. The shipping schedule may involve holiday work not required under the agreement. The case weights or the chemicals used in the finish may be protested as dangerous. An attitude which produces such protests usually has little to do with actual or supposed hazards, and a great deal to do with the general atmosphere of the plant. That general atmosphere depends, more than we realize, on the manner of conveying information—orders, if you prefer—about the daily performance, what to do today and how to do it.

Collective bargaining offers no substitute for an efficient internal method of communicating this day-to-day work information. The lack of such a method may be reflected in a bad collective bargaining situation. It may be difficult to secure compliance through discipline when it cannot be secured through willing acceptance of work instructions which are clear, considerate, and courteously conveyed. Management must do a better job of conveying work information because of collective bargaining. It must use this routine job to increase employee knowledge and understanding and to increase the effectiveness of line supervision; another responsibility outside the scope of collective bargaining.