

Bill Rea ? Job actions hurt innocents

While I understand why they exist, I can also understand why many people have problems with unions.

I've read enough history to grasp what things were like before there were unions, when employers could get away with just about anything they wanted, and there was little the individual worker, chained to a paycheque because his wife and children depended on it, could do in response. But it is also true that those conditions don't exist today, for numerous reasons other than the existence of unions. Those other reasons, I believe, deal with a general and gradual progression of society. Rights for people based on their race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc., have improved over time, simply because society realized the need for such improvement. And in most of those cases, it's still a work in progress. So the lot of the working man or woman would have followed the same pattern.

The justification for creating unions many years ago might not be as strong today, but those unions are still around, still strong and that is not likely to change. I think there are some in this society who would like to see them abolished. That's never going to happen. The political party that would propose such a move can forget about forming any government for the next several decades, if ever. Besides, considering why unions came to be in the first place, I don't think many of us would want to see a return to those conditions.

It is true that I have never been a member of a union. It is also true that I have no great desire to join one, although I can't read the future. It is possible I might some day find myself in a job which requires me to join one. I'll worry about that proverbial bridge when I come to it.

I lost a lot of respect for unions in the days after the 1995 provincial election in Ontario. The Bob Rae NDP government had just got hammered in their attempt to seek re-election, as the Social Contract and the accompanying infamous Rae Days got in their way. Rae had announced he was stepping down as party leader. I was working in Toronto at the time, and attended a number of union meetings and rallies, and the main discussions dealt with who should be Rae's successor. The vicious comments I heard expressed about Rae by these devout New Democrats who dominated these various locals literally blew me away. They had no use for the guy who had led their cause to victory just a couple of years before.

The nature of my job compelled me to keep my mouth shut ? Good thing too, because what I was tempted to say might have earned me a fat lip, knees in the groin, amateur dental alterations and a couple of other unpleasant things. I felt like reminding these guys that Rae was the first leader their party had ever had who had been asked to form a government in this province, and I was willing to bet that none of us were going to live to see the second. I'm still willing to place such a bet.

One of the problems with unions is their existence sometimes leads to strikes or lockouts.

I don't mean to point any finger of blame here, because these types of action usually (not always) come when labour and management can't come to an agreement. In most cases, such negotiations are concluded amicably, although there is probably a bit of grumbling on both sides (good). But when definite job action takes place, it means there has been a failure on at least one of the sides; and sometimes both.

Bear in mind the last such action in the National Hockey League was not a strike, but a lock-out (management driven).

I've thought a lot about that over the last little while, as I heard about the strikes that affected the local universities.

In these cases, as I stated above, either labour or management (or possibly both) have screwed up, but it is the students who are really suffering. When it comes to who the villains are, I have no idea.

I learned about such suffering the hard way about 40 years ago.

The high school teachers in Toronto went out on strike when I was in Grade 12. To this day, I have no idea who, if anyone, was right in that action. I only know I was hurt by it.

My happiest memories of my public education came from Grade 11, and I had such very high hopes for the following year. True, a teachers' strike is something a lot of school kids look forward to, figuring it's an extra couple of days off. But this strike started the day after Remembrance Day, and went well into January before the government of then premier Bill Davis legislated an end to it. The strike was brief enough that the academic year could be salvaged (or so we were led to believe), but long enough that just about all the fun things that students look forward to had to be cancelled (and it is those fun, extra-curricular things that keep some students interested in the academic system).

And there were a number of very bitter teachers. Guess who some of them took their bitterness out on. The students were most convenient.

And it is also a fact that a lot of teachers were not above expressing their views about their position when it came to the strike. If memory serves, most of my classmates were on the side of the strikers in that particular action. That's not too surprising, when you

think about it. Students, in that case, were seldom in contact with management, but they had access to labour all the time. Incidentally, that's not the part I was resentful about. It was a bitter struggle, with a lot of feelings running high. In such situations, people try to take advantage of what they have to deal with. I have spent the subsequent 40 years learning that is simple reality. I was a little amused when I read stories about the strikes at the universities, and statements that so many students were in support of their instructors who were on strike. My guess is very few of them know the names of any member of the university administration, but they know the instructors, and be well assured there was verbal propaganda exchanged (probably surreptitiously and possibly inadvertently) in the days leading up to the strikes. I have a hard time believing there is any such thing as an adult who would have expected anything less.

I don't know who the villains are in these university strikes, and I am certainly not naïve enough to take the word of the aforementioned students at face value.

But I do know who's being hurt in such actions, and they are the very people who are least equipped to take action.

Like I stated above, I really don't have a problem with unions, or even with them taking action.

My problem is with the innocents who are harmed

