

WHY NOT DEMOCRACY IN THE WORKPLACE?

A POLICE UNION IN MOSCOW

By Nick Gier

The United States has been a leading defender of liberal democracy in the world. Why is it then that so many Americans appear to reject representative democracy in the workplace? The Bush administration promotes free trade unions abroad, but does everything in its power to thwart them stateside.

Moscow mayor Marshall Comstock's recent comments (*Moscow-Pullman Daily News*, April 25) about a police union reveal this selective anti-democratic sentiment. Contrary to Comstock's implications, unions are not some mysterious external force; rather, they are, just like any other human institution, made up of hard working men and women in all areas of employment, including medicine, sports, music, and all levels of teaching.

Medieval worker guilds gave us the self-governing principles on which the labor movement is founded. Employees elect their unions according to carefully monitored procedures, and they can "decertify" unions that fail to represent them properly. This process is being carried out right across the border with WSU's staff employees.

In December of 1981 the *Argonaut*, the UI student newspaper, the engineering dean declared that "we may as well live in Russia" if unions are recognized in higher education. The problem is that our governance system was sovietized long ago. Deans can veto department decisions (the [Grishkoff](#) case is a prime example) and presidents can overturn all lower decisions. Ultimately, the unelected State Board of Education (read: Politburo) can do anything that it pleases. It ignores faculty input, and the disrespect that it has shown to Marilyn Howard, its only elected member, is outrageous.

Comstock can't understand why his police officers want to waste their money on union dues when they are complaining that they don't make enough as it is. If the UI had gone to a [salary scale based](#) on the federal GS system, as the faculty union proposed in 1976, UI professors would now be at the top of their peers rather than at the bottom. UI administrators, whose [salaries](#) have outstripped full professors' by 74 percent since 1982,

have always said that peer dominance was their goal, but they have failed miserably in that task.

If we had negotiated a contract with that salary scale, and if we had received raises equivalent to federal workers, today I would make \$50,000 more annually, out of which I could have easily covered my union dues, paid much more in taxes, gone to many more professional meetings, given much more to charity, and returned much more to the local economy.

Labor history is not taught very well in our schools and management has well honed anti-union disinformation programs, so Americans need to be reminded that unions brought them the 8-hour workday, safe working conditions, paid vacations, health benefits, generous pensions, and progressive socio-economic legislation. Millions of non-union workers have been “free riders” as they have enjoyed these benefits for decades. Furthermore, taxpayers ultimately pay for substandard wages because many of these workers fall back on hospital emergency rooms, food stamps, and other forms of public assistance. For example, a study has shown that a 200-employee Walmart store costs local agencies about \$450,000 a year.

Just as an example, unions led the successful passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act, which has allowed 50 million Americans leave-without-pay to care for their newborns or seriously ill family members. For decades most European countries, where the labor movement is much stronger, have provided up to three months paid leave for these purposes. Almost on every socio-economic statistic, countries built by Labor or Social Democratic parties do much better than the U.S.

It is often said that unions are not needed in companies and institutions that are well run and treat their employees fairly. But this is as absurd as saying that democracy is needed only when tyrants arise. George W. Bush hates tyrants, and we all know that he is also a political genius, so why don't we save ourselves a lot of trouble and money and let him stay in office, along with his Republican majority, until they die?

Only employees know what their needs are, and it is presumptuous for any manager to preempt their right to self governance. Mayor Comstock believes that “a union will not

benefit [his] officers,” but they have already decided otherwise. Those below the rank of sergeant have voted unanimously to be represented by the Service Employees Union International, the nation’s most successful and fastest growing union.

I challenge Mayor Comstock to embrace democracy in the workplace and recognize the police force’s vote for union representation.

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