5-20-2009

Kalamazoo Area Labor Management Committee

John M. Dunn

Western Michigan University, john.dunn@wmich.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dunn

Part of the Higher Education Commons

WMU ScholarWorks Citation
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dunn/276
Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to talk with you this evening. In preparation for my visit, I did a little investigative work to find out more about the Kalamazoo Area Labor Management Committee (http://www.mlma.org/Kalamazoo/).

I was intrigued by your mission and objectives--in particular, I was heartened by your inclusive stance and your position that, as a community, labor and management have common goals and interests and a common desire to preserve, protect and improve life in our community.

So, let me start by saying thank you for nurturing those principles. In reading them, I was reminded once again, why I feel right at home in this community. This organization's purpose is reflective of the labor relations beliefs I have developed over a long career that has included labor relations at both the K-12 school district level and at the university level.

At the core, working out the differences between labor and management is really not about the product produced or service provided. It has deeper and more universal overtones. As Cesar Chavez once noted. "The fight is never about grapes or lettuce…It is always about people."

And since it's about people, it's never completely about the particular contract at hand or the issues laid out on the table. It is about basic respect
for those working in your organization and their value as individuals first and contributors to your industry second.

• Good labor relations, I have long since come to believe, is about civility and respect—practiced every day and with every individual in the organization. It is built upon the realization that every person—from the janitor to the CEO makes a real and valuable contribution every day.

Foundation of beliefs
• Those are beliefs I’ve held since my earliest days in the work force. Some of my colleagues from Western Michigan University are here this evening. They’ve heard me tell this story before, so I ask for their patience as I share it again.

I grew up in a small southern Illinois town. The rest of the world was literally opened up to me by the opportunity to attend Northern Michigan University. (Story about the two cooks at NIU who took you under their wing.)

Some of the most important lessons I learned as a college student were learned in the classroom. Others were learned by being under the tutelage of those two warm human beings in NIU's food services. Those lessons have stayed with me.

Today, as president of a university, those lessons still impact the message I try to convey every day to the faculty and staff who make up our work force.
My mantra is that every individual--from the deans and faculty to the landscapers, custodial staff and food service professionals--plays a critical role in how our students feel about themselves, their campus and the quality of the education they are receiving.

And every individual has the capacity and the responsibility to reach out to a student in need of support and make a difference in that student's life.

I'd like to believe that the stage for labor relations on our campus is set with civility and respect and for an appreciation of each person's worth. Once the stage is set, then we can start arguing about compensation, work conditions, grievance procedures, shared governance and expectations.

**Labor relations at WMU**

That's the philosophy. Now let me give you a bit about the nuts and bolts. Because universities are unusual labor relations settings, I'd like to share a little about labor life on the Western Michigan University campus. I will not claim it is a typical university setting. I do not think "typical" is a word that works well in describing a higher education work environment.

Western Michigan University has more than 4,000 employees. They include full and part-time regular employees and graduate students. And those numbers do not take into account the thousands of student employees who make significant contributions on our campus.

- Our employees are represented by unions and by nonunion professional organizations. Of those unions, we have two covering academics:
- The American Association of University Professors, representing nearly 900 faculty members

- A relatively new Teaching Assistants Union representing graduate students who hold assistantships.

We also have part-time instructors at our university who are currently in the process of holding an election to see if they may form a union.

• On the operations side, we have four unions:
  - AFSCME--the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees who represent many of our physical plant and trades workers;

  - The Police Officers Association, representing our public safety officers

  - The Michigan State Employees Association, which represents our Power Plant employees; and

  - A brand new union The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees Local #2, covering a small group of Miller Auditorium employees.

• In addition, we have nonunion clerical and technical staff and administrative and professional personnel. As you can imagine this all makes for a complex labor/management environment. But it works.
Union benefits in academia

• Not all campuses have the same blend of union and nonunion employees. Faculty unions are not present on every campus. I have worked in universities where the faculty is not unionized. I can tell you that there are tangible benefits to unions in an academic setting.

- For our faculty, our union contract helps define issues of academic freedom and set a clear and fair process for making promotions and tenure. These are critical processes in the academic world.

- The other academic concept that can be defined by a union contract is that of shared governance. That concept is fundamental to our system of higher education and exists across academia. It is not contingent on having a faculty union, but it is another area critical to the life of a university that can be somewhat spelled out contractually.

• For all of our employees who have organized, we find the benefits to both the administration and union membership to include:
  - A clear and shared set of expectations and visions
  - A well-defined set of guidelines and criteria for performance evaluation
  - A clearly defined process to address problems
  - What we hope is a shared understanding of fiscal issues and constraints.
• Again, though, undergirding everything has to be a basic sense of respect and appreciation for the value of each individual. That has to be part of every interaction between and among members of our university community--regardless of union status. When employees organize, respect for their decision is just another component of that basic concept.

Closing
Across higher education we hold longtime Rhode Island Senator Claiborne Pell in great esteem. His legacy includes the federal Pell Grant, a need-based program that since 1965 has made higher education accessible to tens of thousands of low-income students annually. Besides being a supporter of higher education, he had a savvy politician's appreciation for the power of unions.

“My opponent called me a cream puff," Pell once said. "Well, I rushed out and got the baker's union to endorse me."

I share Claiborne Pell's appreciation for unions. More important, I respect the decisions members our campus community make individually or as part of an organization. That respect is the start and end point of every aspect of labor relations at Western Michigan University.

We have common goals and interests and a common desire to preserve, protect and improve life in our campus community and in the Kalamazoo community at large.
Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this evening and thank you for the good work you do.