

The Role of Volunteers During a Strike

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The following is an excerpt from Volunteer-Union Relations: A Discussion Paper by Linda L. Graff, Director of The Volunteer Bureau in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. THE JOURNAL requested and received permission to reprint this excerpt for the benefit of our readers. It is actually Section III of this 47-page examination of the various issues and challenges inherent in the relations between volunteers and organized labor. Though the following article stands alone in its discussion of strikes, readers are encouraged to read the full Discussion Paper in order to place the article into its complete context. Other Sections in the monograph are: "The Volunteer and Labour Movements: Co-existence and the Potential for Co-operative Action"; "Sharing the Workplace: The Role of Volunteers in a Period of Economic Restraint"; and "The Co-ordinator of Volunteers: Centrality and a Call to Action." Complete ordering information for this booklet, published in 1983, follows the article. Our thanks to The Volunteer Bureau of The Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton and District.

The question of what the role of volunteers ought to be during a work stoppage is undoubtedly one of the most difficult and volatile within the issue of volunteer/union relationships. It is the question upon which one can find the most diverse perspectives and advice. And, it is a question surfacing more frequently as labour increasingly organizes in the public sector where volunteers are concentrated.

It has become clear to the Hamilton Volunteer Bureau through consultations with voluntary organizations, that this question exists in many agencies which have not, as yet, determined policy or guidelines about whether or under what circumstances volunteer resources will be utilized in the event of a strike. It is also clear that the intense feelings which predominate during a work stoppage suggest that this question, perhaps more than any other, ought to be addressed immediately by all organizations in which a strike is at all possible.

In response to increasing interest in the question, the central aim of this section is to strongly encourage

organizations to face the issue. The various arguments for and against the use of volunteers in strike situations will be outlined with the hope that action will be taken to develop acceptable policies well in advance of a work stoppage.

A. TO USE VOLUNTEERS DURING A STRIKE

There are a number of tenable arguments in favour of employing the services of volunteers during a work stoppage. Depending on the nature of the work conducted by the agency in question, some essential services may be required to continue throughout the course of the strike. While management personnel will "fill in" as much as possible, there may be gaps with which volunteers could assist instead of bringing in "scab" labour. If it is possible to outline, in advance, what these tasks will be and gain acceptance from staff or their bargaining agent, the use of volunteers may be a more palatable solution than the "scabs" alternative.

It may be even easier to gain acceptance for volunteers to simply

continue their regular work but not to take on additional duties. In certain circumstances such as a hospital or nursing home, for example, the assurances, companionship and support offered by volunteers throughout the strike may make it much easier for residents or patients during that period. In an extension of this argument, it has been contended that by looking out for the feelings of patients, volunteers could actually act as a positive public relations factor for the union.

Because feelings run particularly high in the course of a public sector strike with community attitudes playing a greater role than in an industrial-setting strike (Laarman, 1979: 21) more public attention is turned to the plight of the "client" caught in the middle. I.W. Bruce notes that if union agreement can be obtained for volunteers to perform these services to clients:

...it is often the case that the striking workers are quite pleased that volunteers undertake certain emergency duties. In this way, the union can then feel that it is being militant and pushing its sanctions to the limit but that the humanitarian instincts of union members can be satisfied with the knowledge that their action will not bring about undue suffering. More pragmatically, it will not result in a loss in public sympathy for the strike action because of extreme difficulties experienced by clients. (Bruce, 1979: 9)

Again, depending on the nature of the work of the organization, there may be substantial community support for continued or even increased volunteer involvement. Szentlaszloi (1979: 25) states this as an element considered in a decision around whether to use volunteers in the event of a teacher strike because "parents do NOT want schools to close!" Similarly, Berman describes the use of many specially-recruited volunteers during a strike in the Hebrew Home for the Aged in River-

dale, New York. By special appeals throughout the Jewish community and to a neighbouring Catholic college, they had a minimum of 30 volunteers a day:

On some days, as many as 70 people came to offer help. The spirit of mercy and benevolence radiated and encompassed the Orthodox community in Riverdale. Dozens of Jews for whom the home was merely a beautiful edifice on the banks of the Hudson, crossed our threshold for the first time. After their initial experience, they were drawn back almost magnetically. (Berman, 1979: 21)

Another factor which may make the choice of using volunteers during a strike more feasible, is the attitude of the volunteers themselves. While most authors have pointed out that all volunteers should be free to choose whether they will or will not cross a picket line, volunteers willingly agreeing to do so will undoubtedly facilitate the decision to use them.

Flexibility in the form the involvement will take may facilitate the process. For example, Berman notes that some volunteers chose not to cross the picket lines, but kept in touch with residents by phone or postcard during the Riverdale strike.

In other types of settings, volunteers may be able to continue their regular activities without having to cross the picket line. If this arrangement can be made by taking work out to volunteers--away and out of sight of the picketers--such involvement will be less provoking.

A series of eight guidelines concerning the relations between paid and volunteer workers was developed by the Volunteer Centre in Berkhamstead, England. This leaflet notes the problem of volunteers crossing a picket line and suggests:

If volunteers are faced with a picket line which is not prepared to agree that the volunteer workers should cross, the volunteers

should not attempt to do so but discuss the situation with their organizer of the voluntary service, who should, in turn, discuss it with union and management officials. (The Volunteer Centre, 1975)

It goes on to note, however, that a prior agreement which is well known by management and all union members, would significantly reduce the chances of such conflicts. In the event of a picket line, they suggest each volunteer be issued with a document signed by management and a shop steward indicating the basis on which the agreement to work has been determined.

It is interesting to point out the guideline from this same organization about the role of volunteers during a strike. As will be noted later in this chapter, strong resistance to the use of volunteers during a strike exists within the volunteer movement itself and resistance might also be anticipated from labour delegates. In contrast, the committee of the Volunteer Centre which developed these guidelines (and which comprised delegates from labour and volunteer staff) does not discourage the use of volunteers during a strike. They simply suggest a limit to that involvement:

Volunteers in the situation of industrial action should undertake no more voluntary work than they would do in the normal situation.

Any departure from normal work should only take place with the agreement of management and those staff organizations involved in the dispute. (The Volunteer Centre, 1975)

Whatever the reason and variables in the decision to use volunteers during a strike, certain other guidelines and suggestions may be useful to add here.

Every attempt should be made to co-operatively set policies. The bargaining agent's involvement in determining and approving the volunteers' role during a strike would be

ideal. Staff should have detailed information about this form of agreement well in advance so that they understand the limits of the volunteers' role inside.

Volunteers should also be informed (at their earliest contact with the organization) of the policy, expectations and limits surrounding their function during a strike. Some volunteers may choose not to be associated with an organization which uses volunteers during a strike and the volunteers' own position and philosophy should be respected at all times. Further, volunteers ought to be fully informed about what to expect if they are asked and agree to cross a picket line. Feelings may run extremely high, particularly in a strike in the public sector:

Volunteers are likely to encounter a wave of suspicion and hostility when they "fill in" for public employees, since public employees generally take a huge risk when they decide to strike....Therefore, an individual considering a volunteer role during an actual or threatened public employee strike should be aware that the regular staff members are under extreme pressure, fighting for their rights as workers as well as for improved compensation and working conditions. (Laarman, 1979: 21)

The American Hospital Association, in a detailed set of guidelines around the use of volunteers during a work stoppage, suggests a minimum age be established for volunteers: "Because of the highly emotional state of some strikers, it normally would not be a good idea to expect minors to cross a picket line" (American Hospital Association, 1978).

This same set of guidelines also advises the director of volunteers to arrange escorts for volunteers crossing picket lines when entering and leaving the hospital and to determine the volunteer's wishes about whether official records of his or her time during the strike will be kept.

There may be an option, in some

instances, to recruit volunteers from the community rather than from the corps of regular volunteers. In this way, regular volunteers will not be faced with conflicts arising because they have worked side-by-side with employees and the regular volunteers will almost certainly be in a better position after the strike if they have remained neutral throughout the dispute. However, if new recruits are located, extra care in their supervision will be necessary.

If a prior agreement has been reached with union representatives concerning what volunteers will and will not do during a strike, this agreement must be closely honoured. The temptation of volunteers to do more, or of management to ask volunteers to do more, must be resisted. And, it must be assured that volunteers are fully trained and adequately prepared to do the work asked of them.

Even within the guidelines noted above and even in cases where legitimate and tenable arguments favour the use of volunteers during a strike, there may remain some serious and perhaps even dangerous consequences from active volunteer involvement. It is necessary to look at the "other side" before determining the best course of action.

B. NOT TO USE VOLUNTEERS DURING A STRIKE

Laarman has pointed out that the employer-employee relationship in a public employment context does not differ significantly from such a relationship in private industry. Public institutions and voluntary agencies, by definition, are not operating to make a profit and may therefore "give the impression that they are not really employers subject to labour-management problems" (1979: 20). However, even without a profit motive, managers in the human service field are under extreme pressure to balance budgets and maintain services. The rights of workers to make wage demands and ensure quality

working conditions do not differ in the public service either.

Appealing to the question of "who's right?" in any strike situation is therefore not very useful as a method to determine where one's role as a volunteer ought to be. In fact, it has been argued that "neutrality" should be the key principle guiding decisions. Bringing volunteers into an agency or institution during a strike may automatically establish the "side" with which volunteers will be identified. Szentlaszloi suggests further, that even recruiting new volunteers to work during a strike is problematic for it would "add a third 'power group,' the community, to strengthen one side...against the other" (1979: 25).

This element of neutrality appears to dominate the reasoning behind many policies which hold that volunteers ought not to work during a strike. For example, the Joint Statement of the National School Volunteer Program and the National Education Association (U.S.A.) states:

The best interests of students is served when volunteers and school staff work co-operatively. In any situation of controversy, the successful relationship between volunteers and teachers can best be maintained if the school volunteer program adopts a position of neutrality. In the event of a strike or other interruptions of normal school operations, the school volunteer program shall not function in the schools. (quoted in McCurley, 1979: 15)

And, this quote from William Lucy, secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees:

During strikes, a volunteer's proper position should be as neutral bystander. Certainly, the volunteer shouldn't cross a picket line and take a regular worker's job. This neutral stance is dictated both by humanitarianism and rationality. (quoted in McCurley, 1979: 16)

While few could object to the rule that volunteers must be able to freely choose whether or not to volunteer during a strike, some contend that asking even a willing volunteer will place that individual in the middle of an unpleasant adversarial context. With the high public profile of a strike in the human services field and the greater tension Laarman contends exists in these settings, a convincing argument can be made against using any volunteers during a strike.

There seems little question that volunteer involvement during a strike will have the effect of prolonging the strike. Although volunteer services may make the experience easier for the patient or client, the net effect may be to draw the situation out longer.

Laarman advises:

The best services a would-be volunteer can render in a strike is to do whatever he or she can to END THE STRIKE. Not only does a strike settlement mean restoration of the best possible services for the consumer, but it also means that volunteers can return to their proper ADJUNCT role in the institution. (1979: 21)

An associated risk in volunteers continuing or expanding their regular role during a strike lies in the potential for individuals to get "beyond their depth." Many factors contribute to this potential such as a volunteer seeing things not getting done and from good intentions being tempted to "fill in"; the absence of usual levels of supervisory input for volunteers because staff are not present and managers are likely to be occupied by additional duties; the absence of adequate training or preparation of newly recruited volunteers or of volunteers recruited to do different work during the strike. Volunteers performing duties beyond their ability or beyond their job descriptions can have dangerous results for the volunteer, for the client, and for the agency, and in a strike setting,

the possibilities for volunteers to get beyond their limits are much greater.

Despite these risks and ethical arguments around the use of volunteers as "strike breakers," some employers will value highly the short-term advantages of volunteer involvement during a strike.

What must be fully considered, however, are the long-term consequences for both individuals and the program. As Szentlaszloi (1979) has noted, the relationship between paid and unpaid staff is crucial to a successful volunteer program. Without the full acceptance of paid staff, volunteers will soon detect tension, lose job satisfaction and leave the program. (It must be remembered that without a pay cheque, job satisfaction serves as the basis for high retention levels in a volunteer program.) It is obvious that paid staff are not likely to favour the volunteer who crosses the picket line or who, in any way functions to prolong a strike. In perceiving the volunteer to be "on the other side," volunteer-staff relations in the post-strike setting will surely suffer. Szentlaszloi raises the crucial question here:

Is it worth risking the destruction of the programs and relationships built up slowly over several years and possibly losing those (thousands of) hours of volunteer help? (1979: 25)

In the case where she was involved, the school board decided the risks to volunteers and to the volunteer program were far too great to warrant the short-term value of volunteers working through the strike. She notes that in this way, volunteers were to be in a much better position to aid the "healing" process when normal activities were resumed (Szentlaszloi, 1979). Again, the preservation of the volunteers' neutrality puts them in a unique position after the strike to address residual bitterness and to help bring the setting back to normal.

When an agency, organization or institution in the human services

field considers the possibility of a strike, there are many factors to think through before determining what role volunteers will fill. The decision is not an easy one and valid arguments exist in both directions. It appears that fewer risks accompany the decision to not use volunteers during a labour-management dispute although it is also likely that service-dependents will suffer more.

Where the priority is to be placed is clearly a matter to be determined in each individual setting. One cannot over-emphasize, however, the central points to remember. Regardless of the content of the policy, it should be:

- (a) tri-laterally determined (volunteer, labour, and management involvement);
- (b) mutually acceptable;
- (c) fully understood by all three parties;
- (d) rigidly enforced;
- (e) in existence long before a strike becomes likely.

FOOTNOTES

¹ McCurley (1979: 16) documents the results of a 1976 survey by the (U.S.A.) National Centre for Voluntary Action which asked leaders and

co-ordinators of volunteers in the field:

*Should volunteers continue to work during a strike of paid staff? yes: 1,584; no: 1,058

*Should volunteers take on duties of striking paid workers? yes: 860; no: 1,876

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