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Why Is It Labor Unions vs. Volunteers?

By [Susan J. Ellis](#)

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This month's hot topic is often discussed in whispers and in private, and rarely confronted openly: labor union resistance to volunteer involvement. In the belief that any topic can be discussed and examined, I am willing to risk controversy and even anger. But more than anything I hope my editorial will bring this discussion out of the back room; please share your reactions with us all.

I should start by saying that I respect the historical importance of unions which truly improved the conditions for working people everywhere and I continue to see their value in maintaining the quality of work life today. Furthermore, I believe volunteers should not be used to replace the jobs of workers. My frustration with unions is in their response to creative volunteer development. They often see the development of any volunteer position as a direct threat to their jobs, not recognizing that it is entirely possible to be in favor of 100% employment and 100% volunteering.

Although it is impossible to adequately cover the entire scope of this issue in one commentary. I would like to start the discussion by introducing three thoughts on this topic.

Volunteerism played an integral part in the rise of unions and the development of jobs in America

The union movement could not have grown without the help of thousands of volunteers. Union leaders began as volunteers, for the most part, organizing workers during off hours and losing pay while protesting conditions. Even today labor unions rely heavily on the contributed services of shop stewards and other local organizers, as well as sponsor many charitable projects in which union members serve their communities.

In addition most jobs in the non-profit sector and government originally began as volunteer positions. Traditionally, volunteers have created more jobs than anyone else. They prove what work is necessary to do full time. Furthermore, volunteers are usually the strongest supporters of additional funding because they see the important work employees do.

Volunteers usually take on tasks not jobs

Despite fears that volunteers will be used to replace paid staff, it would take 10 or more volunteers working in shifts to replace one person's full-time job--and the coordination headaches would be enormous.

When volunteers are introduced into a setting, they offer the opportunity to reallocate tasks and free paid staff to do work that requires consistency, continuity, and perhaps specialized training. Ideally, employees retain accountability for getting all their work done, but now can delegate the doing of the tasks to volunteers while moving on to different work themselves. Unfortunately, this is exactly what unions fight. Do their members understand that their leadership is demanding status quo rather than opening up new assignments?

There is often confusion between saving *jobs* and saving *tasks*. Unions are reluctant to allow any change in the job descriptions of their workers, again out of fear that this will lead to job elimination. This position is doomed, and for many more reasons than volunteer involvement. Today's world is changing so rapidly that no one can expect to do their work in the same way forever. From technology to diversity to legal issues, the work place is in a state of flux--perhaps permanently. Unionized workers must be willing to redefine their tasks to keep up with advances in technology, cope with changing client needs, and react to new mandates.

The focus should be on what is best for the people being served

Which leads me to the last point (for this essay at least!). Labor unions historically organized in profit-making environments to challenge top executives and stockholders who were getting rich off the labor of low-paid workers. When unions moved into government and nonprofit organizations, their confrontational attitude about "employers" was transferred whole, without any consideration as to who controlled the purse strings or who gained personally. Just who is the "enemy" in a setting that serves the public and gets its revenue not from sales but from taxes or donations? How can there be any validity in arguing that volunteers have no right to help organizations for which it is perfectly acceptable to give cash? Why shouldn't taxpayers be willing to "tithe" time to some government programs in order to maintain acceptable levels of taxation?

Lost in the shuffle is any consideration of what is best for the people being served. I have had many encounters with union members. One incident that remains particularly vivid involves a union member (wearing a union tee-shirt to a staff orientation meeting) who, when asked what she would suggest as a way past the impasse of limited resources and the needs of children in the area, shouted: "I don't care; it's my job that matters!"

It is not unreasonable to ask unions to recognize that funds are being cut for many services--or that the needs for services are increasing faster than funding. First we must cope with providing services. Then--or simultaneously--we ought to be advocating and lobbying together for adequate funding. This is a job that volunteers do amazingly well!

What do you think?

- What is your perspective on the issue of employment "versus" volunteering?
- Do you think there should be a difference in union attitudes when organizing in a nonprofit or government setting?
- Have you experienced union resistance to volunteers? How? What did you do about it?
- How can we work together with labor unions to gain a better understanding of both points of view?

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Using Susan's task vs. job viewpoint is an excellent way to alleviate fears in a non-union environment as well. It is quite true that volunteers are responsible for components of a job not the entire job. The needs of stakeholders, in particular clients, should indeed be the foundation of determining what gets done by whom. Whenever I have used this as the focus in discussing utilizing volunteers in new areas with staff, it seems to click for them.

Submitted by Georgan Johnson-Coffey, Volunteer Services Manager, Allen County Public Library, USA

I think it is dangerous and potentially unreasonably divisive to generalize. Certainly, in the UK, attitudes of individual unions, individual union members and the experience of individual volunteer-based services vary dramatically. There is no "unified" union response in many situations, though, certainly, historically, union concerns regarding volunteer workforces potentially replacing paid labour have been raised.

I personally feel that these concerns are healthy and play an important part in ensuring that organizations do not simply fall into the trap of abusing volunteers. By having to be mindful of the fundamental differences of paid and unpaid work, I feel that organizations may learn to be more respectful of the input of volunteers.

Furthermore, I do not think it is helpful to view labour union responses as unreasonable: in an ideal world, I do believe that volunteers should be paid for the work they undertake, appropriate to the level of skill, experience and qualification. Obviously, though, in many situations, volunteer-based responses exist because no funded option is available, likely or even appropriate. However, to see union concerns as "unhelpful" or "unreasonable" is to negate some of the fundamental ground gained - and currently under threat in many parts of the world- made by unions to ensure reasonable working conditions.

In the UK, some unions will recognize volunteers, trainees and students as a valid part of the labour market and welcome volunteers' efforts to organize in the same way as organized labour. This I think

is an admirable solution to the problem of division. Ironically, however, many charities actually don't want their volunteers to organize. No surprise then that the "myth" of antagonistic unions is able to be perpetuated, after all, who except the unreasonable would see the willingness of people to work for free, for noble causes, as wrong or problematic?

No. Herein, I think, is the ridiculousness: your article is distinctly anti-union, emphasizing the historic benefits which volunteers have played in unionism, implying some kind of debt which should repaid how? By shutting up and leaving the concept of volunteering uncriticized? Does it not occur that, perhaps, now, unions could offer something to volunteers.

As to the idea that volunteers' work does not represent a risk to paid posts - they perform tasks, not jobs, you say- this is truly nonsense. Of course volunteers' work represents a risk to paid work and presents existing power structures with vast opportunities for exploitation. This is exactly why, we feel, that managers and leaders of volunteer-based services should, at a strategic level, be acting as conciliators between volunteer workforces and labour unions, encouraging formal acceptance of volunteer unions and negotiating, as organizations, appropriately. Or, as I often wonder, is there really any longer any difference in the relationship between the management of many volunteer services and good old fashioned factory managers?

Submitted by Ken Pratt, Drug & Alcohol Resources & Training Exchange, England

Susan J. Ellis Responds:

I think it is dangerous and potentially unreasonably divisive to generalize.....

Thank you for responding to this month's hot topic and giving us an international context! As our site is still comparatively new, I hope that your debate style will be a model for others who might disagree with my original "get the ball rolling" posting. It's provocative discussion that we're trying to generate, on the premise that leaders of volunteers need to be thoughtful about what they do, even we can sometimes disagree.

Your argument speaks for itself. I simply wanted to note that we have a fundamental disagreement: I happen to believe that our societies would be improved if we had 100% employment AND 100% volunteering. You comment that in an "ideal world all volunteers would be paid" does not reflect my utopia. There are some things for which payment actually changes the nature or meaning of the work (as in love freely given or sex for money). That's why I think it is false to pit employees "against" volunteers. Both are needed, but for different reasons.

The point, as you said at the start, is not to try to cast all union members as anti-volunteer--but also not to assume that union demands are always (by definition) the most worthy or socially helpful.

I'm intrigued with the Union issue - I never had one at City Hall - we never replaced a paid job and we didn't interfere with union work, unless the unionized paid staff requested it - ie., clerical support - but, it sounds like others have had some issues. Your points make sense to me, but you always have, Susan. Thanks for the site and the work.

Sarah Elliston, UW Vol. Resource Center, Cincinnati, Ohio USA

The union topic is especially pertinent for me. It seems that few of the leaders in our field are willing to lay the hard truths out there, so we're lucky to have you. I hope to be able to do some of that one day. Thanks for more to think about.

Melissa Eystad, Department of Human Services, State of Minnesota, USA

Comments from Readers

Submitted on February 11th, 2016

Spencer Chiimbwe, MA in Work, Labor and Policy Studies, Student, SUNY Empire State College, Theills, United States

I love the article and the related interactive conversation about volunteerism and unionism in the workplace. Allow me to argue that what has changed the innocent narrative of the spirit of volunteerism is the disturbing metamorphosis of union leadership from the race to the bottom to race to the top. Meaning, it is no longer the goal of unions to fulfill their service-driven missions in attending to the struggling masses at the bottom of the economic ladder, leaders in most unions have gone to bed with sociopathic plutocratic tendencies of affluence and thereby resetting the tone from the pursuit to serve the people to enjoying the very careless patterns of wealth that take away from the ordinary people they serve in the workplace. It is time society addressed the graffiti that has littered well-meaning foundations of unionism.

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