David Hunter: Everyone who works owes thanks to organized labor

By David Hunter

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There was a time in the United States when business and industry reigned supreme. Some people became super rich. Most worked six days a week and 12 hours a day, including children.

If workers didn't like the conditions, they were free to go somewhere else to conditions that were no better. It wasn't just about money and benefits - it was also about the dignity of those who actually provided services and made the products that came out of the factories.

Then there were unions. Every American worker today who has a paid vacation, retirement plan, safe working conditions and a 40-hour work week can thank organized labor. Every single benefit was fought for and won, only grudgingly given up by the people running the show.

Even in places where unions have never been big, the fear of having to deal with them forced employers to improve wages, working conditions, benefits and to recognize the people who did the work and kept things moving - including, state, municipal and federal government employees.

There have been union abuses. In fact, I recently called out local labor leaders when they abused their position. The abuse by unions, however, pales in comparison to what working people suffered before they began to organize themselves.

As late as the early 1970s, I helped organize workers who were treated like replaceable cogs. They endured indignities that ranged from supervisors who stood at rest room doors and timed workers, to plants where women were routinely fired if they became pregnant and a sick day for anyone meant loss of a job.

Unionism has declined over the decades as generations who never had to face inhumane treatment grew up. Today, all over the United States - Wisconsin, Ohio, Tennessee, to name a few places - there are those at work trying to destroy organized labor by breaking legally binding agreements, not with negotiations but with legislation.

Organized labor and the money it raises also has served as a balance against
corporate interests to keep one political party from buying every election. With corporations now having the same status as people, able to give virtually unlimited funds to those who are trying to destroy organized labor, we are moving towards an unchecked corporate oligarchy.

Every benefit wrested from companies and corporations has been met with cries that they couldn’t afford it and would be driven out of business, yet really big business people continue to prosper, even when individuals are suffering. American workers are being treated as villains, when the real villains live like potentates and have golden parachutes.

In recent days, I have heard accusations of "union thugs," hurled at people exercising their right to peacefully assemble. There have been union thugs - to deny it is to deny history - but breaking union contracts that were legally negotiated is as extreme an abuse of raw power as I’ve have ever seen.

Thugs also can wear suits and ties, belong to country clubs and sit in church next to us. A thug believes that might makes right and the end justifies the means. If government itself does not respect binding contracts, who will?

Those who have nothing to sell but labor are also entitled to respect and a decent living. Other people supply the capital, but the workers produce the product and keep the wheels of government turning.

If unions are destroyed, working people will be back where they were 100 years ago - at the mercy of people who don’t care what happens to them.

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