

## **Mitchell's Musings 9-12-11: Where's Waldenville?**

I am in transit this week and so this musing will be brief. I suspect readers had their fill of the usual Labor Day “where-are-unions-going?” news articles last week. A typical newspaper article of that genre, which you may well have read, will have noted that private-sector unions have been declining. It will go on to say that now public-sector unions are the new – but troubled - face of unionism.

The articles which took that approach were generally not positive reviews. One example appeared on Labor Day in the Sacramento Bee which focused on California unions in particular:

*...The decline of manufacturing in the 1960s and 1970s hit unions hard, but they found a savior in Jerry Brown, who was elected governor in 1974. He signed long-sought collective bargaining legislation for farmworkers as well as teachers and other government workers... On this Labor Day, it would be accurate to say that without more than a million public employee members, the California union movement would be virtually dead.*

*...Rather than celebrating political hegemony this Labor Day, therefore, unions are losing ground due to economic circumstances, hoping voters will impose new taxes, and fearing they'll pass a ballot measure that would curb unions' power to collect political money from members. It's a holiday that drips with irony.*

Full article at: <http://www.sacbee.com/2011/09/05/3885175/dan-walters-a-labor-day-that-drips.html>

However, in the wake of the various ten-year memorial services and retrospective articles on the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, it may be time to recall that there was at that time – only a decade ago - a different view of public workers and, therefore, public sector bargaining. Public workers were not viewed with hostility immediately after September 11. They were instead heralded as brave “first responders,” particularly in regards to the New York City attack and the activities of police and fire fighters at the World Trade Center.

One of the effects of the decline of unionism is that courses on traditional labor relations, i.e., union-management relations, have all but vanished. Indeed, courses that deal with ordinary employees – nonunion or union - have largely disappeared from (American) business schools. When unions were strong in the private sector, they were seen as a challenge to management and therefore worth studying. If unions were worth studying, so were the employees they represented or sought to represent.

But nowadays, human resource courses, to the extent they exist, tend to deal with relations among managers (management teams, leadership, etc.). It is not clear there are any ordinary employees in the archetypal business school model firm, just managers.

For those readers who may still teach traditional labor relations - perhaps in policy schools - there are some multimedia resources available that deal with negotiations and dispute settling with a public-sector focus. But they are old sources. In the late 1970s, the U.S. Department of Labor sponsored the Waldenville series, dealing with negotiations, mediation, and grievance arbitration. I will provide links below but, again, the main problem with the videos available – Waldenville and others - is that they are outdated. The hairstyles of the actors look funny. Moreover, the economic climate was different.

The Waldenville series was made during a period of high inflation and large nominal wage increases. To contemporary students, the wage increases under negotiation will seem hugely outsized. However, it would not be terribly costly to redo these videos, updated to current reality and issues (and hairstyles). They could deal with furloughs to deal with budget problems and/or underfunding of pension plans. With modern technology, distribution of videos via the Internet is essentially costless.<sup>1</sup> And the basic lessons of the Waldenville stories that were told still need telling.

In the Waldenville negotiations film, for example, the fact that there are factions within unions that, in effect, require an internal negotiation is brought out clearly. The use of informal discussion between the key labor and management reps outside the official bargaining room is illustrated. In the mediation episode, it becomes clear that the mediator who is brought in is not just a passive go-between but instead uses leverage to push the parties towards agreement.

The bottom line for today's Mitchell's Musing is an editorial comment/proposal. Much of the video teaching material related to labor relations is out of date. It needs updating. There is unlikely to be a commercial supply of such material forthcoming. If up-to-date material were available, there would be greater public understanding of the bargaining process. But if the job is going to be done, any updating will need to be sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor – as it did in the 1970s - or by some nonprofit organization.

It's a job worth doing. Any takers out there?

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<sup>1</sup> The Waldenville series were distributed on VHS tape cassettes. Some university libraries may still have copies. However, such tapes are prone to deterioration.

**Links to Waldenville negotiations video:**

- Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Px86OwXcVAI>
- Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDfKMHuupuE>
- Part 3: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jm0RRrZBWd0>
- Part 4: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9htze\\_cJHs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9htze_cJHs)
- Part 5: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLTjPVd380s>

**Links to Waldenville mediation video:**

- Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZh3FVP6mSs>
- Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXDQyPwODiY>
- Part 3: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PpcZ5W27JxU>
- Part 4: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKg14EvTb4k>

**Links to Waldenville grievance arbitration video:**

- Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b30qUsvBP8A>
- Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFUDD4kfQ24>
- Part 3: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UP4hdPxQm38>
- Part 4: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExlwSCRft7k>
- Part 5: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bcmBtKWFINU>

