
WORKING PAPER SERIES

**COMMENTARY:
AN ORWELLIAN ERA**

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COMMENTARY: AN ORWELLIAN ERA

I sometimes ponder the rather unpleasant idea of what a 21st century American workplace would look like if unions didn't exist. I have to tell you, it's a pretty dismal looking picture. I say this because I know that unions, whatever their limitations, do good things for members. Serving and promoting the interests of its members is what a union is all about. But after watching a segment called "Whose Life Is It Anyway?" on TV's 60 Minutes, I've come to realize that the scenario for life in an increasingly non-union world is even more dismal than most of us could imagine.

The 60 Minutes segment focused on how the private habits of employees off the job are coming under the scrutiny of the employer. Specifically, the boss of a non-union insurance company in Michigan gave his workers fifteen months to give up smoking. We're not talking about smoking on the job, but smoking in general. Smokers, he reasoned, were health risks who drove up the cost of insurance. To keep costs down, the company administered random drug tests designed to identify and fire smokers. Several long-term workers were fired because they couldn't kick their nicotine habit despite taking advantage of all the "quit smoking" programs their employer offered.

This infringement on our personal lives sounds terrible, doesn't it? Some of us probably think it's illegal. But guess what? In most states it's perfectly

legal for a private employer to fire people for actions unrelated to work. Sure, state and federal laws prohibit discriminatory treatment of people in protected classes. But smokers are not a protected class. Neither are those who eat junk food or who participate in dangerous hobbies such as skydiving and skiing. The list is almost endless. Companies have fired individuals for asking embarrassing questions of a political candidate, even though the candidate's forum was not connected to the job; one person was even fired for drinking the wrong brand of beer in a local nightspot hours after he finished work.

Now, what's the point?

The first point is simple and basic. Corporate employers are intruding into our private lives. That's why we need unions. In union shops, none of these abuses would have happened. First of all, they

had nothing to do with the job, so management couldn't act. More, what happens on the job is protected activity. Unions provide workers with job security in the form of due process. Once a worker's probationary period ends, that union worker cannot be fired at the whim of the boss. Union workers are entitled to due process.

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Unfortunately, union shops are becoming few and far between. Today only about eight percent of the private sector labor force is organized, making these abuses the rule rather than the exception. In fact,

the decline of organized labor is bad for everyone. It makes the contractual and political gains achieved by labor look like privileges rather than rights. Since the 60 Minutes segment was about

health care, let's take a closer look at health care issues.

Years ago when organized labor was growing and negotiating good health care contracts, most Americans expected some form of health insurance coverage. As the labor movement and health care expanded, health care was viewed as a right. Now, as labor shrinks and health care coverage disappears with it, those unionists who still have good health plans are often viewed as a privileged elite who must be treated like everyone else. In short, they shouldn't have costly health care coverage when most others don't.

Sadly, we're moving into an Orwellian era when corporate Big Brother dictates what we do in our private lives while undercutting what we once viewed as fundamental rights. Big Brother has a corporate as well as a governmental face, and if we don't rebuild the labor movement, Big Brother will get bigger and our private lives will disappear along with the many benefits negotiated by unions.