Labor Unions And Democracy

One of the big questions about local labor unions is, are they democratically run? Well, let the record show that the answer to that question has just been answered.

If democracy requires two or more relatively permanent factions, the answer is probably no. But if democracy demands only the leaders respond to individuals and groups, the answer is generally yes.

Local constitutions require elections of officers and limited terms. According to the Landrum-Griffin Act, it requires local elections at least once every three years. Furthermore, the union must apply the terms of the contract equally to all bargaining union employees.

While most members believe their union works to their benefit, many were not involved in the founding and may view the union simply as their agent in employment matters.

In return for dues, many members expect the union to relieve them of the effort and detail involved in regulating their employment relationship.

What may happen is that many members may really want representation in return for their dues, not participation and involvement in the union business.

The probable truth is local union governance slightly resembles municipal politics. Union elections usually generate only moderate interest. Incumbents are usually reelected unless the rank and file believes a critical issue has been mishandled.

If members are concerned about a lack of democracy, they can oust the leadership, turn down contracts or vote to decertify.

There are many legal safeguards to ensure sufficient democracy to require responsiveness from a two-party democracy, and that appears to be enough for most members.

Hawaii State Teachers Association president Wil Okabe secured a second three-year term, fighting off a challenge from a member of his negotiating committee. It was a vote of confidence he needed to go into the upcoming negotiations with the governor.
Commitment to the union involves a psychological investment in its goals – commitment behaviorally reflected in participating, espousing union goals and persuading others to join and work toward them.

While correlated, commitment and satisfaction are not the same construct. In this situation, commitment is positively related to the severity of potential job loss.

This means the current negotiation at an impasse with the governor’s negotiators indicates an increase in cohesion during the crisis. So the teachers are not going to be pushovers for teacher evaluations, pay cuts and benefit reductions.

We could be in for a long summer now that the HSTA has shown that democracy is alive and well in its union, and it is not going to sit by and agree to anything that it perceives as unfair and unjust – such as politicians setting policy for teachers.

Teachers are, after all, certified professionals, and politicians don’t even need a high school diploma to run for office.