

Voices: My Experience with a Union

Thursday, December 15, 2016



I have been working in the hospitality field for 25 years — restaurants, healthcare and university food service. I consider myself unique in that I pursued a degree in the hospitality field and never looked back. I have always wanted to work with people and serve others with the simple goal of “doing the right thing.”

I have never been represented by a union, but I have managed in a union environment for 20 of my 25 years. I’ve sat at the “negotiating table” three times. While not every story is a horror story, a union can make “doing the right thing,” at times, difficult.

While I cannot comment on what a UNH union contract would look like (I don’t know any more than anyone else does), I can tell you from my experience that everything employees now have is on the table. It is a negotiation. There is give and take. Like what you have now? You could lose it as a result of good faith negotiations. If not in this contract, maybe in the next. Can you be sure of the union negotiating team’s priorities? Are they the same as yours? What happens if you say red and the team negotiates blue? Will you have the influential voice that the union is promising during organizing? I was once part of a negotiation when a benefit was on the table. A “hired after” date was negotiated as an eligibility requirement to qualify for the benefit. The “hired after” date just happened to be the same as the hire date of the least senior member of the union negotiating team. Essentially, that union

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negotiating team looked out for itself.

Hiring was often a challenge in some departments. The contracts I followed included a “retreat” clause. On the surface, it looks harmless. The reality is it can be devastating. Here is an example. Let’s say position “A” opens. It is posted for two weeks and is awarded to staff member “B.” The “B” position is now posted for two weeks and awarded to staff member “C.” Then the “C” position is posted for two weeks and awarded to staff member “D.” The “D” position is posted for two weeks and is filled by an external candidate because there was no qualified internal applicant. It’s now been eight weeks minimum to essentially fill one position. Time, training, stress of open positions, staff pitching in to cover needs, lives and schedules at home have been changed. Everyone seems happy in their new position until “A” decides the job isn’t what they thought it would be and “retreats” to their former position within the 60-day retreat clause. The dominos begin to fall, lives are impacted as everyone is forced to go back to their former positions and morale suffers. The new external hire who was working out well is now unemployed, and you start over with a repost of position “A.”

What happens if employees tell us how others “don’t pull their weight” or a co-worker is creating a “negative work environment?” The university has a system in place to ensure that we give every employee the opportunity to succeed. The reality is, however, that people and jobs are not always a good fit. I have been involved on more than a few situations where employees were warned and the union “grieved” the warning. It wasn’t because the union believed that the employee was in the right. It was because the union views protection of dues paying members, right or wrong, as its job. On one occasion, the union president was complaining about a poor worker. When the worker was warned, this same union president grieved the warning!

In closing, I'd like to say that I've been a UNH employee now for about 10 months. While not everything is perfect, employee morale is higher here than in any union environment I've worked in. The benefits offered by UNH are equal to or better than those in any union shop I've worked with. What I have witnessed here is the administration's utmost respect and appreciation for students and staff.

—William McNamara^[1]_[SEP]

Executive Director of Hospitality Services

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