

Tuesday, February 1, 2005

Unions

Yes, I'm still alive. :)

It's just so much more fun to post comments at other people's blogs than to create new entries here at mine. But today I read a week-old post at Asymmetrical Information and felt an urgent need to write a reply, even though chances are very few people will see a comment posted there today. So I cross-post it here. I'm going to try and do more of that.

(In summary, Jane's post mentions that American labor unions are now pretty much only powerful in industries either run by or strongly tied to government. Manufacturing unions are in decline and service unions are generally a non-factor, and she wonders why. My answer, which principally addresses the original question but was partially inspired by some of the earlier comments as well, is below.)

I'd say a big part of the problem is that the folks who'd be voting in the elections (or stringing up the lynching rope for whichever moron cow-orke forced them to happen in the first place) grew up in a world populated by third-generation union folks. We got to see which of them were happy about the unions (the incompetent, lazy, and otherwise generally unworthy of emulation) and which were either ashamed or angry that they were required by law to be union members in order to work in their chosen fields. We watched as unions fought tooth and nail to preserve every dehumanizing ritual of working life even when employers tried to ease or eliminate some of them. We saw how fiercely the unions hated any manager or company that wanted to treat employees as individuals with their own merits and faults and needs rather than as huge impersonal classes. We were driven (and then later learned to drive ourselves) past union paving crews standing around gossiping and drinking coffee while lane closures made us late for our appointments.

Is it any wonder we decided we wanted none of that for ourselves?

It may be true that at one time conditions were so bad that only unions or government could make them tolerable...and if the choice is only between those two, I'm happier to have it done by unions. But those days are OVER. They've been over for more years than my generation has been on this planet, and the social, technological, and economic conditions that killed them appear based on all reliable evidence to be irreversible at this point.

If the job you do doesn't require thought, it's either already being done by a robot or will be soon enough, and if it does then you're more valuable to your employers as an individual than you are as a member of a huge class of supposedly interchangeable "labor".

If an assembly line worker in the 1930s did his assigned job exceptionally quickly, the result was only that he spent more time waiting for the line to deliver the next piece for him to work on. If he did his work exceptionally well, no customer would ever notice. It was a model with powerful built-in incentives to reward the average and ignore the exceptional, and so unions' built-in hatred for the exceptional was less destructive. But those jobs are now being done by robots. In the service sector, every worker's skill, speed, and attention to detail shows up in ways and places that customers notice, whether the worker is a lawyer, doctor, or senior software engineer making six figures or a hotel maid or burger flipper making minimum wage. Inflicting a union on such jobs utterly destroys the economically rational incentive process.

Posted by Matt at 10:43