

# Happy workers make companies prosper

I used to take my union for granted. As a New Yorker working for county government out on the tail end of Long Island, I joined in with many others when the union didn't give us enough of a raise or made us wait longer than a year for our increase.

It didn't matter that I had 14 paid holidays, four personal days, sick time that averaged one day per month, accrued vacation time based on my many years of service, a \$1,500 longevity payment, a fully paid retirement and health insurance plan, and the opportunity to take a written exam, score high enough, and perhaps earn a promotion.

It was only when I traveled out of New York that I realized how much the union had worked to receive phenomenal benefits for the workers that had paid its minimal dues from inception.

Now, I'm not saying that every company or trade must have a union to keep workers happy because that just simply isn't so. But as we approach Labor Day, and I compare my husband's 30-year struggle with the textile trade in North Carolina and my 20-year career as part of a powerful union, my heart goes out to every employee who has ever been laid off due to a plant closing or bankruptcy.

My husband worked for Fieldcrest Cannon, which was later Pillowtex, which went bankrupt last year, laying off more than 6,000 employees. But even prior to Pillowtex's fiscal disaster, he told me about people who had worked hard for the company who were terminated right before they were ready and able to retire.

The union, UNITE, had only been active for around two years having finally won the vote to represent the workers — but it was much too late and the future of Pillowtex was already in the hands of a dismal fate.

The company's downturn affected morale long before the uncertainty of work began to play havoc in the minds of the workers. Breaks were now limited to one 10 minute break in the morning, a 20-minute lunch, and one 10 minute break in the afternoon. Turkeys once given out at Thanksgiving were now non-existent. The

Kannapolis employee store, to add fuel to the already brewing fire, offered goods made in Mexico at a discount to the workers whose jobs were in jeopardy from work being done in Mexico!

Then there was the "vacation week" when the plant closed in July and everyone stayed home and collected their own salary plus those who had worked a number of years collected a "sort of" bonus based on their annual income based on — yes,

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production.

But annual incomes declined when production declined because layoffs of a few weeks or even months became the norm. And once the company went belly up, the long awaited bonuses, along with the overpaid top management who raped the company of whatever was left, ran for parts unknown.

One week and a few sparse holidays were all the time off my husband had earned per year after 30 years of devoted service. He worked beside men and women with families in the same boat, worse off than he was because both of them worked for Pillowtex.

The meager retirement he was to receive, \$80 per month after 30 years of service, isn't even available to him because the pension fund was under-funded \$3 million — so, no one is receiving a hard-earned pension from Pillowtex, Fieldcrest Cannon or anyone.

Besides all of the above and the deplorable way he and all the other textile workers were treated in the end, there was so much more lost along the way that made the end even more despicable.

The pride and dignity of the workers had floundered for years because Pillowtex was all there was in Kannapolis and unless you wanted to up and move from your family and friends, you stayed with a company who couldn't care less about working conditions and

practiced unfair labor tactics. Since they were the only game in town, they held all the cards and what became inevitable was largely due because they didn't care.

It's a vicious cycle, but one that can be broken if a company president decides early on that a successful business not only makes a ton of money for him or her, but produces a wealth of talent and devotion in its employees. It can start with things that seem so miniscule, but really aren't when you care about your company and its workers.

For instance, my husband now works for Continental Teves and he took me by the plant the other day. There was something in his voice when he spoke that had been missing all during the five years that we've known each other: pride.

He pointed out the manicured grounds, the nearby forest where deer roam freely, the part of the plant where the company had installed a full cafeteria, and the benches outside where he and the other third-shift workers relax on break.

The company had already given him a raise and he's due for another one shortly. People stay at Continental Teves for years not because they're the only game in town, but because they know the secret of success: keep your workers happy and your business will prosper.

So, on this Labor Day, perhaps some of you bosses out there might want to sit down with your human resources manager and talk about why there's so much absenteeism lately or why production isn't up to the same volume as it was last year.

You don't have to give your workers 14 vacation days a year, but how about a personal thank you note with free movie passes or a few hours off on a Friday afternoon? And that turkey you were on the fence about giving this Thanksgiving? I encourage you to give it, because if you don't, you may find yourself alone at the table years from now.

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