

# Unions enhance our communities

BY JANMARIE TOKER

## LOCAL COMMENTARY

May 1 is International Workers' Day, which commemorates the 1886 Haymarket Square Massacre in Chicago when several people died during a general strike for the eight-hour work day.

Since that day, there have been countless strikes fighting for the eight-hour work days, safe working conditions and fair pay. Much of what we, as workers, have today is thanks to the people before us who spoke up.

In fact, as we celebrate International Workers' Day, there is nothing more important to honor than the voice of the worker.

There is no better way to illustrate the power of employees' voices than by looking at the differences we see between Bath Iron Works (BIW) and the former DeCoster Egg Farm now operated by Land O'Lakes. These two longtime Maine companies are as different in the way they treat their employees as they are in the products they sell.

One builds ships, the other sells eggs. One's on the coast, the other is inland.

One welcomes its workers every day with a sign that says, "Through these gates pass the best shipbuilders in the world." The other business ran, as former Labor Secretary Robert Reich called "as dangerous and oppressive as any sweatshop we have seen."

BIW welcomes four unions to its bargaining table: Local S6 IAMAW, Local S7 IAMAW, Bath Marine Draftsmen's Association and the Independent Guard's Association.

DeCoster Egg Farm went so far as to push for a bill stripping the rights of workers to unionize — which was recently passed by the Maine Legislature.

On one hand, at Bath Iron Works, workers are dedicated to others — forming committees to review benefits and safety, and volunteering as stewards to represent, defend and support the interests of his/her fellow employees.

Employees share information about new regulations, safety studies, layoffs, and benefits with each other. They consider themselves a family and act as such — celebrating good news with each other and pulling together to support co-workers in need.

On the other hand, at the former DeCoster Egg Farm, workers weren't allowed to gather in groups outside of work hours. They weren't allowed to publish newsletters or even post notices on bulletin boards.

Employees were prevented from accessing legal counsel. Legal aid workers coming to the homes of workers were harassed and threatened.

When employees are empowered to speak up, and can be part of controlling their work situation, everyone benefits.

The workers benefit because they can be a part of a workplace where they are respected.

Businesses benefit because they have workers who are happy, dedicated to their jobs, to each other, and to the company.

The community benefits as well because, of course, those workers and their families live in the community. In addition, when employees have a voice at a company, that company is more likely to care about the community where it operates.

When you have a workplace where the workers aren't allowed to gather, talk or support each other, it has a bad

effect on the community. If a company cannot even respect the people who make it run, how can it be expected to care about the place in which it does business?

When neighbors have to resort to suing a business to resolve issues involving swarms of flies and an overwhelming stench as the people in Turner did in 2004, you know there is no true community spirit.

It's important to understand the impact a union has not only on its members but on the company and the community.

The question is — in which community would you rather live? One where a company doesn't care about its workers or its community or one where the company listens to its workers and its community?

The differences between a union-welcoming business and a non-union business become very clear when you look at the former DeCoster Egg Farm and Bath Iron Works. It comes down to allowing workers to have a voice.

On International Workers' Day, let's take a minute to appreciate the voice of the worker. It is the voice of the people and it is more powerful than you think.

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