

What does it mean to belong to a Union? Kurt Eckrem, WARLCA VP

When you read the title of this article, did you think about what it means that **YOU** belong to the NRLCA? Is it only that dues are taken out of your paycheck, and nothing else? Is it merely figuring that if something isn't right with your paycheck, or management isn't following the rules, there is someone else who will fix it? Does union membership only mean you get a magazine in the mail every now and then, and that maybe you will read it at some point?

The online Bing dictionary defines the word 'union' as: *a combination so formed, especially an alliance or confederation of people, parties, or political entities for mutual interest or benefit.* Another definition it includes is: *an organized association of workers formed to protect and further their rights and interests; a labor union.* The common thread in virtually every definition of the word 'union' is that participants in a union get some benefit from joining together; that individuals, when united, have an advantage they wouldn't have if they remained separate. There are many references to the power of working together- Aesop, in one of his fables, wrote "in union, there is strength". An old African proverb says "Enough spiders, working together, can tie down a lion". In nature, which is more successful, the 'lone wolf', or a pack of wolves working together?

Have you ever stopped to think of all the things workers, mostly through their labor unions, have fought for and accomplished over the decades, things that make your job more bearable- Social Security, minimum wage, the 8-hour work day and the 40-hour week, overtime pay, sick leave, annual leave, seniority, paid holidays, pensions, access to health benefits, the list goes on and on. What about the protections offered by OSHA, OWCP, FMLA, and the Fair Labor Standards Act? These were not created because of the generosity of employers, but because of the demands of the workers. There are laws against discrimination and harassment in the workplace, and child labor laws, because workers saw the need, and united to make it happen. All of us can look at the list and pick out one or two things we think we can do without, but what about another employee who counts on those particular items to get by? Not only do all of these past accomplishments benefit the union worker, but have raised the standard of living for all workers as well.

Now, do you just take for granted that all the things I listed in the last paragraph will still be there next month? next year? the rest of your career? I wouldn't count on it. How would your job be if paid sick leave was eliminated? What if management could award a route to whomever they wanted? What if you misdelivered a package, and you were fired, and there was no union to help you keep your job? Make no mistake, unions are under attack. Not just the labor organizations themselves, but your ability to join together and exercise the power that being united can bring. The corporations and the CEO's and the one percent would much prefer a low paid, disposable workforce, incapable of banding together and creating any kind of pressure to change that. Take a look around at the laws being passed; the right to work laws, the requirements on not paying union dues, the historic low numbers in union membership. If we aren't vigilant, if we don't

stand together to assure we maintain the pay and protections we now enjoy, they will be eroded away. Anything we lose now will be doubly hard to get back. This is not a time to be complacent.

So, back to my first question- What does it mean that **YOU** belong to the NRLCA? Yes, you pay dues. That money goes to assure that the stewards are adequately trained to help and protect you. It's also used to provide the information you need to know about what your rights and responsibilities are, through the magazines, the websites, and things like Count trainings. Your dues are also used to hold meetings where you can get together with fellow rural carriers to discuss issues, ask questions, and vote on any changes you would like to see and on those members you want to represent you. Along with the advantages associated with union membership, there is also, however, an obligation. That obligation is to keep the union strong. It can be as simple as keeping yourself informed, on the National Agreement, the PO 603, and what your rights and responsibilities as a rural carrier are. And sharing that information with your coworkers. It means standing up for your coworkers if they are being picked on, and not turning a blind eye to contractual violations. It means being a good example to non-members, by working to make changes you believe are necessary, and not just complaining and bad-mouthing the union. It means not making up excuses to skip meetings because you think they are inconvenient or boring. It can also mean becoming a local steward, voting when you receive a ballot, showing up at Count trainings and Contract ratification meetings, and caring about the Rural Craft that **YOU** are a part of. A union is at it's strongest when all the members do their part. Remember the spiders.