



RESEARCH STUDIES

workplacebullying.org

**The WBI Website
2011 Instant Poll-A
Unions and Workplace Bullying**

Gary Namie, PhD - Research Director

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Unions and Workplace Bullying

WBI 2011-A Instant Poll

WBI Instant Polls are online single-question surveys that rely upon self-selected samples of individuals bullied at work (typically 98% of any sample comprised of currently and formerly bullied individuals). No demographic data are collected, but IP respondent samples are typically 80% or higher female. Our non-scientific Instant Polls accurately depict the perceptions of workers targeted for bullying at work as contrasted with the views of all adult Americans in our scientific national surveys.

January 2011 WBI Instant Poll, $n = 313$

Employers have unchecked power over non-unionized employees. Whatever dribbles of democracy and employee participation that happen are determined unilaterally by the employer (the owner or highest-level executive). If sharing does not suit him or her, employees are told to hold on, shut up and be glad you have work at all.

Driving employer rights is the doctrine of “employment at will” adhered to in the U.S. as if the courts had ruled on it (they did not). Business sold this notion as if it were bidirectional. Employers can put you on the street for no cause. Employees can dump their employers and put themselves on the street. See, both have “free will.” Nonsense!

If you are prone to magical thinking, you might believe that all it takes to combat bullying (mistreatment by the employer or its agent, managers) is the collective effort by concerned co-workers who witness the events. Yes, in your dreams you see the heroic target in the boss’s threshold backed by throngs of agitated and supportive peers. In reality, chances are better that only a breeze will be behind our hero at the door when left to fight alone.

The abandonment of bullied targets is not fantasy. It is reality. We have surveyed targets and looked closely at the issue in our 2008 Coworker Study. In less than 1% of cases do co-workers provide support as solid and comprehensive in the above fantasy. There are many reasons to account for this lack of courage. Most explanations come from the field of social psychology. Just this month, there was an article describing the bystander non-intervention effect (research that followed the famous Queens, New York 1964 murder of Kitty Genovese). And I could lecture on several others. Suffice it to say, the “F” word drives it all. Fear of being the lone supporter, fear of botching the help, fear of being pushed away by the target whose shame makes him want to be left alone, fear of incurring the bully’s wrath and being next.

So, how do workers in the 21st century achieve some sort of power balance with employers? Are Unions still the ones to balance the power difference?

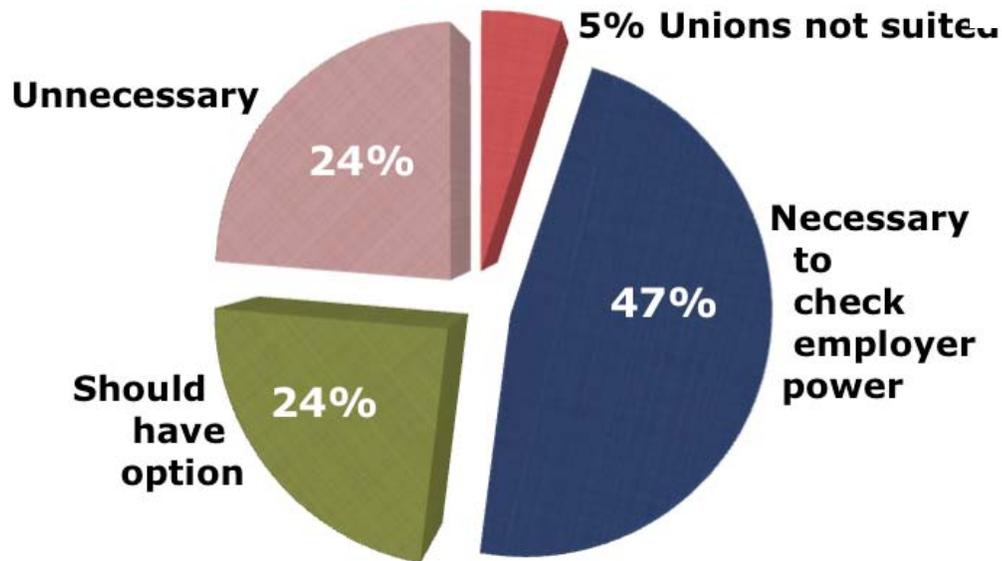
The question asked: *“Given the current assaults on workers by employers, what role, if any, do you see for unions to address workplace bullying?”*

The response choices and percentages:

- Unions are more necessary than ever to protect worker health and safety. Employers’ power must be checked. .4728
- Everyone should have the option to join a union if he or she wishes. .2396
- Unions are unnecessary. They are no more trustworthy than are employers. .2396
- The contemporary worker and workplace are rarely suited for unions. .04792

About three-quarters of targets still believe that unions have a positive role to play and want to have the option to join or not. With a new Congress that took power in 2011, it is unlikely that Federal legislation to make joining unions easier will ever pass into law.

However, another finding from this poll is that 24% of bullied targets do not trust their unions any more than their employers. This is the reality we hear from callers and what we see when we go on-site. I distinguish this distrust from a negative public stereotype about unions fostered by corporations and media (only 5% adopted that view). The distrust captured here is from people who have probably asked their unions for help with bullying situations and been rebuffed. Their unions did no more for them than HR. It is based on real experiences.



How could unions not play a central role in stopping workplace bullying?

Four principal explanations come to mind.

1) Unions officers rise in the ranks based on their ability to fight and be adversarial (good to win victories for the union's members) and do not want any curbs on their actions with anyone else, whether it is with management or with other members. In other words, they might be intimidators and want to stay that way without interference from a new company policy or a future law.

2) Unions are organizations, too. The bureaucratic mindset can take over. People get defensive for the organization and show less compassion for the people the organization is supposed to serve. Some unions have a low service threshold. They don't care about helping members.

3) Too many unions have been co-opted by "partnership" talk with employers. They want to get along and ignore their members' needs. This doesn't mean there is corruption in every instance. Unions have been forced into concessions by scheming, but cash-rich employers for years. Employers threaten to shutter the business and move it offshore if pensions aren't abandoned or health insurance co-pays aren't increased, etc. In other words, unions have been whipped into submission. Survival is the operating mode. Concern over quality of worklife issues seems unimportant.

4) Unions can be great when the bully is a non-member, typically a manager. But when bullying is member-on-member, most unions are paralyzed. They erroneously feel compelled to defend both the abusive and abused member. In reality, the responsibility is to represent, never to defend.

None of these reasons are to be used to defend ineffective unions. However, if unions are to regain trust of their members, each of the above four issues must be confronted honestly and reversed.

Our work has expanded to offer options for unions to serve their bullied members. We have had marvelous union officials attend WB University to take back to their unions new ways to deal with bullying. Unions need to do much more to help their bullied members.

Gary Namie, PhD
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