



**RESEARCH STUDIES**

*workplacebullying.org*

## **The WBI Website Instant Polls**

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# Unions and workplace bullying

Results of the Jan 2011 WBI Instant Poll on unions' role in workplace bullying.

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, [read this to learn the deliberately distorted history](#)). 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 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](#). 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? Will Facebook and Twitter accomplish parity with corporations? Some may think so, but why have we given up on Unions? More in a moment about that. But first let's see what 313 bullied targets who completed the first 2011 WBI Instant Poll thought about the role for unions.

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

The responses 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

Results of WBI Jan 2011 Instant Poll

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, the most important finding from this small sample survey is that 24% 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 be so feckless about 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 hapless, 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 [WBI University](#) to take back to their unions new ways to deal with bullying. In fact, in late 2011, WBI will offer a special Unions-Only University to increase the number of wise member-supporting unions out there.

## Post-bullying economic woes for bullied targets

In a recent WBI 2011 instant poll that asked how the next job compared financially, the news is not good.

The question: For those who have ever lost a job to bullying, how did the next job compare financially?

Responses from 241 site visitors (a sample of individuals known to declare themselves to be targets of bullying at work)

26% — That job was never replaced – there was no next job

25% — Less money, but safer

13.7% — Less money, bullied again

11.6% — More money and safer

17% — More money, but bullied again

5.9% — Got another job, no change

Of those who did get another job, the financial status was:

LESS money earned — 52.8%

No change — 7.9%

MORE money earned — 39.3%

Thus, nearly 40% did come out ahead confirming the validity of our advice that there will be an eventual end to the bullying. And if you move along quickly enough without suffering severe health harm, you will have a new life. Getting out can be positive.

The fact that 53% did suffer an economic setback is probably based on the dwindling number of well paying jobs on the market to replace the job the target once loved. To those people, we emphasize the benefit to personal health and sanity of leaving the toxic workplace. You were too good for that place anyway.

The saddest fact is that over one-quarter of bullied targets were not able to replace their lost job. We know that bullying comes uninvited. No one asked to be intimidated or humiliated. Since the most veteran, competent workers are targeted, it is safe to assume that they once loved their jobs very much. They simply wanted to be left alone to do the work for which they were getting paid. But bullying displaced them and put them on the street involuntarily, regardless of whether they were fired or had to quit to preserve their health. This is the tragedy of workplace bullying.

## Survey respondents predict more bullying with lost bargaining rights

In a WBI 2011 instant poll just completed, site visitors were asked if rights for public sector unions were lost, would there be more or less workplace bullying in the future. More bullying was overwhelmingly predicted.

The question: If public-sector unions lose the right to bargain for working conditions, do you expect to see more bullying and abuse in your workplace in the future?

216 individuals completed the survey. 47% were members of a union; 53% were not.

The responses:

45.8% — I have no union — YES, I predict more bullying

6.9% — I have no union — NO, I do not predict more bullying

35.1% — I am a public-sector union member — YES, I predict more bullying

1% — I am a public-sector union member — NO, I do not predict more bullying

9.7% — I am a private-sector union member — YES, I predict more bullying

1.4% — I am a private-sector union member — NO, I predict more bullying

Here are the various ways that people predicted that YES there would be more bullying:

Overall: YES — 90.7% ; NO — 9.3%

Union members: YES — 95% ; NO — 5%

Non-union individuals: YES — 86.8%; NO — 13.2%