

Monday, September 3, 2007

Remember people and their labors every day.

Labor Day parade (from Library of Congress's website). On Labor Day, sales (handled by labor), vacations (serviced by labor), and the end of summer for too many people eclipse deep thinking and feelings about labor. Every day should be a day to care about working people, to consider them in all our actions, and to take them into account in our purchasing decisions. Millions upon millions of workers worldwide labor and live under unspeakably miserable conditions and pay, including countless factory workers in China, whose communist revolutionaries came to power proclaiming justice for the working masses. Imagine, then, how bad the working conditions are for millions of people in countries whose governments and employers barely pay even lipservice to justice for workers. As always, when we think globally and start by acting locally, miserable treatment of workers often starts with the custodial employees emptying our wastebaskets and cleaning our toilets, the dishwashers and plenty of other kitchen workers in the restaurants we frequent, the seasonal farmworkers picking our fruits and vegetables, and the workers who produce the countless cheap products sold at Wal-Mart and countless other discounters (who often are not giving their own workers good pay, working conditions and careers). Those of us who are employers, managers and bosses owe our employees harmonious and just working conditions, fair pay and benefits, and full respect and dignity. A supervisory manager at a previous legal employer told me that he generally followed the misguided lesson from a more experienced teacher of not smiling to his students (when he was a teacher) nor now his new employees until Thanksgiving. Why? So that the employees do not get lulled into a false sense of security and substandard work? Every worker deserves a thanks for the good work s/he does, every day. Every kindness deserves a thank you every time. For those workers doing work that we do not believe in -- whether it be fighting in Iraq, arresting people for marijuana possession, torturing alleged enemy combatants, or anything else one disagrees with -- it remains essential to understand and see each such person as a human being, not to mistreat such people merely because they are mistreating others, but still to be firm in calling for a change of the system that leads them to do such work, and sometimes to call for them to turn away from such work. We have many options to better the lot of workers, starting with our own wallets. An unfortunate irony of voting with our wallets can be to leave jobless the very workers we wish to help. However, if we are willing to send our money and business where workers and justice are better served -- including a willingness to pay more money as a result -- hopefully the same workers will find jobs with the more just employers. For those in jobs involving mistreating other workers or non-workers, sometimes the only option is to leave such jobs if efforts fail to stop mistreating them. As one particular judge -- not one I looked to for much justice -- once perceptively observed from the bench, most people, including cops, are just looking to get through the day. This situation raises multiple issues, including how to approach persuading people. However, if most people just want to get through the day, how much effort are they investing in justice rather than in just surviving for themselves, their families, and their friends? On the topic of judges -- who also are workers, although often wielding tremendous white collar power backed up by the power of the state -- a colleague who has known many local judges since childhood and through the old boy/girl network recently told me that half the judges he knows in a particular county do the work out of a sense of public service, with the other half dreading the grind of the daily docket. No matter how some judges may not seem to give much of a damn about justice, or not seem to define justice very justly, they remain humans including those toiling much longer than a forty hour workweek. While still on the topic of judges, it is critical to remember the work of their supporting crew, including the courtroom clerks, office staff, clerks' office staff, people cleaning the courts' hallways and bathrooms, and the list goes on. In his book *Working*, writer Studs Terkel has written of the misery so many face working eight hours daily (if they are fortunate enough not to be working longer days than that). Thus, we are left with the importance of balancing each humans' need to work to live -- rather than to live to work -- with the importance that each human put in sufficient effort and ability to justify being hired, kept, and sufficiently paid for the work performed. As I read over this blog entry, I am reminded what I already know, which is how far I need to go myself in following these words daily and over time with my employees and everyone else. Thanks, again, to everyone who now works for me, Jay and our law firm, who has ever worked for us, and who has helped our clients along the way. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 07:00