

14-1 Overview

Since their inception in the late 1700s, labor unions in the U.S. have had a colorful history. Successes, controversies, and fluctuating membership have been staples of their existence. And though the number of employees joining unions is a decreasing percentage of the workforce, unions continue to play a vital role. The auto industry, for example, would not function as it does today without the presence of unions.

A union might begin to represent the employees of an organization using one of two approaches: The employees may expressly request representation from a union, or the union can set its sights on a particular employer for the purpose of representation. Either way, once the organizing action commences, a process is followed to secure representation. First, an organizing campaign begins that not only identifies interest among employees but also informs them about the union effort so they will support it. Next, authorization cards are distributed at a formal meeting. To move forward with the process, at least 30 percent of the employees must sign the authorization cards. The third step is an official election. In other words, employees vote to determine whether or not the union will become their organized representation. If the election is successful, the fourth step is certification from the National Labor Relations Board, which grants legal recognition to the union as representatives for the employees of the targeted company. Once this is established, the final step is actually the beginning of the representation process: collective bargaining. In this phase, negotiations take place between union representatives and management regarding pay, workload, and so on.

As overall membership declines, unions have found certain areas of the workforce that once were overlooked amenable to representation. One particular group where they have found success is the professions, particularly in the medical fields. Among union proponents, it is hoped that these efforts will increase overall membership in labor organizations.

14-2 Case 1: Hummingbird Manufacturing: Organizing Attempt

You are the human resources manager for Hummingbird Manufacturing and thoroughly enjoy the job you have held for the past eight years. You count many of the employees working at the candle-making plant as your friends. In addition, clear respect is afforded you from the employees, and you in turn treat each employee fairly while ensuring that their needs are effectively met.