

Quality of Work Life: Good or Bad?

A BUZZ phrase that is getting attention in the business world these days is the "Quality-of-Work-Life Movement," or QWL.

Naturally, it sounds good and it might be a good thing, depending upon what it means and how it is applied. It has been called a booster shot for what ails labor unions.

Generally, QWL seems to refer to involvement of workers in shop floor decisions through problem-solving committees. This could mean anything from improved product quality to a device for handling union grievances.

QWL could help reduce absenteeism and job turnover, perhaps. QWL might ease the adversary roles of management and labor. Or it could slow productivity by introducing another layer of management.

There is no question that unions are in difficulty, both in declining proportion of workers who belong and in public attitudes toward unions. Some argue that labor unions are obsolete.

"What we in labor face is not a passing period of acute crisis,"

AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland said recently. "Rather we face a permanent change to our basic role in American life."

This "basic role" received a severe setback when some 12,000 air traffic controllers disregarded their oaths not to strike and illegally walked away from their jobs and their incomes. Apparently most voters approved actions taken by President Reagan.

Termination of the strikers had a salutary effect on other unions of public employees. Postal employees and teachers in many localities suddenly found raises and benefits offered them were quite acceptable. Elsewhere officials decided to observe the law by discharging workers participating in illegal strikes, as in Midwest City.

It is noteworthy that union leaders felt it was desirable to appeal to other organizations for help in a "solidarity protest" of President Reagan's policies last Saturday, closely following the regular Labor Day parades.

Labor experts have been saying,

that collective bargaining must evolve from "a form of warfare" into the means for governing the workplace with respect for wage matters. Backed by lopsided federal laws, union spokesmen often have disregarded practicalities of business as well as opinions of union members when they entered negotiations.

Using membership dues and assessments, union leaders have exercised undue "political persuasion" through contributions to lawmakers' campaign funds. Sometimes this has been done to the extent that many of the latter was said to be "owned by labor."

Net results of the enmity that exists between labor and management include higher costs to the public, accelerated inflation, lowered productivity and quality, and stronger foreign competition.

The QWL movement may have good points but before it is accepted as a solution to management-labor problems its definitions should be studied. It could turn out to be something else entirely.