



COVID-19 Pandemic:

A Moment of Opportunity for Labor Unions?

Employees, and their family members, are likely to be anxious about being in the workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several employers such as Amazon, InstaCart, Target, Whole Foods, McDonald's and General Electric have experienced work stoppages, walk-outs, protests, sick-outs/call-ins and other forms of protected, concerted activity (PCA) as employees raise concerns over COVID-19 related working conditions. Some of these activities have been spontaneous and others orchestrated by employees, labor union or other third parties.

For many healthcare workers, it's been the most traumatic and pressure-filled weeks of their careers. As a result, they are holding candlelight vigils to spotlight employers for failing to provide adequate PPE to protect them against COVID-19 infection and holding rallies to put pressure on hospitals to provide hotel rooms for nurses and other hospital staff exposed to COVID-19.

This is a unique moment of opportunity for labor unions. Unions such as the United Auto Workers (UAW), Teamsters, United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), UNITE HERE, Service Employees International (SEIU) and National Nurses United (NNU) have raised their profiles over the past several weeks by increasing attention on the impact of COVID-19 on their current members and negotiating with employers on workplace safety and pay issues. Unions can be expected to capitalize on continued worker anxiety and focus on unorganized workers in an effort to replenish their dwindling membership ranks.

What can employers expect?

At the very least, employers can expect heightened employee concerns related to COVID-19 to continue for some time as employees are in the workplace in greater numbers interacting side-by-side with each other, vendors, visitors and customers.

Employers can expect labor unions to tap into worker COVID-19 concerns and develop messages that resonate with them about safety concerns in the workplace, job insecurity, lack of management response and inadequate communications. Activity may start with employees raising concerns over basic safety protections (PPE, social distancing, disinfection, etc.) and evolve into workplace issues that existed before the pandemic such as inadequate pay, perceived inequitable income, unpredictable schedules and limited health care, benefits or time off.

Many labor organizers are building on recent activism that saw fast-food, retail and hotel workers as well as teachers protesting and striking for higher pay. In addition, the labor movement has branched out to engage workers in the media, tech sector, gig economy and the academic world in the form of university research and teaching assistants.

The most common and powerful platform for employees to engage each other or with labor unions is social media.



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What strategies can employers put in place to prepare for and respond to employee concerns?

HR and management's ability to prepare for employees to return to the workplace in greater numbers will have an enormous impact on your operations from a morale, productivity and business continuity standpoint. Preparation and communication are of utmost importance as crises like COVID-19 are anxiety and stress ridden. Having a thorough plan in place to establish a safe and healthy workplace and sharing that plan provides peace of mind for your employees and their families.

Other key activities include:

- Quick issue identification and resolution with priority on safety issues
- Strong workplace safety and hygiene protocols
- Expanded communication/education/training
- Establishment of a PCA response plan
- Supervisory training on recognizing and responding to PCA, two-way communications and employee engagement
- Strong positive employee relations (PER) strategy
- External communications/public relations/social media strategy

Foundations Human Resources Consulting is uniquely situated to assist in this area through a variety of channels, including video conferencing, webinars or virtual training. Your company will benefit from the expertise that our team of professionals have after decades of experience implementing programs to ensure a positive work environment and mitigating union activity if it starts. Our consultants have experienced firsthand the legal, labor, and employment challenges in a lean business environment and will use their combined 220+ years of experience to partner with you based on the current and future needs of your organization. Our areas of expertise include development of employee communications such as strategy and messaging, union campaign plans and communications, positive employee relations plans, employee engagement, morale monitoring, training and development, labor union research and external monitoring.

For support, contact Foundations HR Consulting at 859.286.1100 or FHRC@FoundationsHR.com.