

EDITORIAL

American way too clearly defined

The practice of collective bargaining has always been contrary to "the American way." Slowly but surely manufacturing unions, unions made up of people who steadfastly believed in "the American way," have been edged out of existence. In place of the workers are machines and in place of the vocal and passionate unions are the quieter and less colorful public sector unions.

This week the battered, bruised and barely breathing manufacturing union received what could be their life-support system. This relief came in the form of a letter from the director of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, John Calhoun Wells. Wells wrote to Senators Edward Kennedy and Howard Mezenbaum that he believed "the use of striker replacement is destructive to the collective bargaining process" and that it "chills meaningful bargaining." A very simple observation, seemingly obvious, like the child who sees a group of adults trying to free a truck that has become stuck in a tunnel because it is too tall; the child suggests letting the air out of the tires to make the shorter thus allowing it to pass through the tunnel.

Of course, hiring replacement workers hurts the bargaining process. Employers use this tool to flex their muscle and to scare workers into foregoing a strike. The hiring of replacement workers also allows management to refuse to bargain at all, this was aptly proved by the Air Traffic Controllers Strike.

The idea that one can (and will) be punished for freely expressing anger or frustration at a situation is also contrary to "the American way." At the conclusion of every war presidents and patriots claim the war was fought for freedom. In the area of labor relations who has this hard-fought freedom?

The workers at Caterpillar Inc. plants in Illinois are about to find out who has the freedom in this country. Their branch of the United Auto Workers have just begun a strike against their company. A company they claim has engaged in union-busting activity and with whom they have they have worked for three years without a contract.

As they went out on strike Caterpillar began running advertisements for new workers.

In the United States a company cannot fire workers for going out on strike, but they can permanently replace them. What voice do the workers have if they have been replaced? They have no leverage, in essence they are exercising a freedom in a free country that they cannot afford. They are being punished for unamerican activity in a country that claims to guarantee its citizens individual freedom above all.

The struggle of Caterpillars workers is indicative of other battles being waged to preserve what was once a shared value system called "the American way."

Arguments used in defense of the management will be used in opposition to health care reform, in opposition to fully funding higher education. These arguments were used in opposition to desegregation. The simple reason give is that it has always been done one way "the American way" and why fix it if it ain't broke?

The simple fact is that in the area of labor relations in the United States the collective bargaining apparatus is broken. Hiring replacement worker may be good for business but it harms the individuals who must band together to protect themselves.



OPINION

Hollywood loses O.J. and sense of reality

Maybe Los Angeles is just weird. Maybe Los Angelenos spend too much time around movie sets and can no longer discern between what they watch on the big screen and what they see in real life.

Whatever the reason, as police chased an alleged murderer through the streets of Los Angeles, hordes of commuters stopped their cars on the sides of roads and freeways to gawk and cheer. They were cheering on a sports hero, O.J. Simpson, as though he were dashing to score a touchdown. They were really cheering an alleged murderer as he tried to flee authorities.

What's the difference?

It is a line that should seem so clear — the line that separates reality from a television program.

But the line is not clear. It blurs, wavers and no longer sets the boundary between reality and fantasy. And it's not just in jaded, big-city Los Angeles that people confuse real, tragic events with something else.

Right here in Eugene, as I sat glued to my television set, I had to keep reminding myself that this wasn't the latest Keanu Reeves action movie I was watching. It was the news — a live, televised documentation of real events. It both disturbed and perplexed me that I had to continually pinch myself to keep from enjoying the chase so much, to remind myself that I was watching a tragedy unfold.

I, like millions of people, was brought up watching crime shows on television and at the movies. Crime makes for good entertainment that's for sure. From *Dragnet*, the cop show of the 1960s, to *Adam 12* in the '70s, Americans have watched the good guys chase the bad guys. *CHiPs* and *Hill Street Blues* mesmerized Americans in the 1980s along with scores of cop movies. America loves watching crime in action.

Now in the 1990s, a new breed of crime shows has emerged. The shows still have the same cast: the cops and the criminals. But networks have fired the actors and replaced them with the real thing. Now just take a police officer, a criminal and a video camera and there you have America's new



GAYLE FORMAN

cop shows.

It is the perfect marriage of entertainment and reality, helping to close the already narrow gap that separates these entities.

And here you have the wave of the present and future: the commoditization of crime.

The whole O.J. Simpson chase was just another episode of *Cops*, another great television program. The murder, the ensuing investigation and Simpson's flight were no more real to American viewers than *The Flintstones*.

Is it any wonder that people had a difficult time distinguishing between cop shows and Simpson's chase? Crime is infiltrating mainstream American culture like never before.

Perhaps television violence has numbed us to a violent reality, but it goes beyond that. As popular culture adopts criminals as its icons, how are people supposed to tell the difference between admiring an icon and rejecting a criminal if they are one and the same?

O.J. Simpson was not cheered by Los Angeles crowds solely on account of his successful sports and acting careers. The crowds were just enjoying the entertainment even though what was entertaining them was a crime. People are used to being entertained by crime. Why make an exception for a real crime?

Criminals continue to be a source of entertainment. Many of them have gained fame and admiration on the basis of their status as criminals alone.

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John Wayne Gacy, a convicted and now executed serial murderer, has had great success recently in the sale of his paintings. Charles Manson's songs are making a comeback now that the rock band Guns n' Roses has covered them. People wear shirts bearing Manson's face. He is a pop icon, and his crime made him that way.

Serial killers in general are achieving fame. Yes folks, it is the serial killer trading cards complete with grisly statistics on the back. There is even a magazine called *Murder Can Be Fun*, which chronicles various murders and disasters.

In this day and age, the strangest things will net a profit, and people are scrounging to discover these oddities, crime included, and exploiting them for every nickel possible.

As profiteers shine their big flashlights on aspects of society that have traditionally remained on the fringe, they bring them well into the folds of society for all of America to see and know.

Once America becomes acquainted with these new ideas, they lose their edge of strangeness and of scariness. Nothing can be alternative anymore, for everything that once was considered deviant is now a commodity and thus commonplace and normal. Even murder.

Gayle Forman will be a columnist for the Emerald in the fall.

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Letters to the editor must be limited to no more than 250 words, legible, signed and the identification of the writer must be verified when the letter is submitted.

The Emerald reserves the right to edit any letter for length or style.