

Stacked System

Democracy denied to workers.

Adults spend most of their waking hours at work. We live in a democracy when we're asleep, but our constitutional rights mostly disappear when we get to our jobs. Nowhere is this problem more obvious than in the flawed and corrupt "election" process for enabling workers to choose whether they want to represent themselves through a union.

Opinion surveys show that about 40 million American workers wish they had a union in their workplace. This desire is understandable since workers with unions make about 30 percent more than their counterparts in the same type of job. But the chances of these employees realizing their desire is very small because the "election" system is highly stacked against workers.

Many assume union elections run the same way as elections for Congress. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth.

When employees want to form a union in their workplace, they must go through a process that none of the Founding Fathers would recognize as democratic. Instead, almost every aspect of workplace "elections" looks more like discredited practices of rogue regimes abroad.

The starting point of any regular election is that both sides have equal access to the list of registered voters. But in a workplace election, while management can mail anti-union propaganda to workers for months, the union doesn't even get a list of who the workers are until a few weeks before the vote. If we had elections for Congress where one candidate had access to the voter rolls for years and the other gained access in October, none of us would call that a free and fair contest.

Within the workplace, management is free to campaign against the union to every employee, every day, throughout the day; union organizers are completely banned from the workplace. Management can post anti-union newsletters and posters on bulletin boards and walls while enforcing a ban on pro-union notices.

One of the most outrageous practices is also one of the most common: forcing employees to participate in mass anti-union campaign rallies. Under federal law, employers can require workers to attend anti-union rallies. Not only are pro-union employees not given equal time, but they can be forced to attend on condition that they not say anything; employees who speak up can be fired on the spot. Management can hold these forced meetings up to the day before the vote.

In most union elections, supervisors are required to have repeated one-on-one confrontations with the individuals they oversee. The person who has the most direct control over workplace conditions tells subordinates how to think and act. The message is clear: If you ever want a raise or a day off to take your kid to a doctor, you better not support the union.

Even "election day" itself takes place in the workplace — typically decked out with anti-union propaganda — under the watchful eyes of managers. In 2003, former New Jersey Gov. Christie Todd Whitman led a Republican Party delegation to observe elections in Cambodia. Whitman declared that the vote was not "free and fair," in part because government-affiliated "village chiefs [sat] outside polling stations and check[ed] off voters as they entered and exited, providing a palpable sense they were being monitored despite casting a secret ballot." Yet workers across the U.S. are subject to just this type of intimidation whenever they seek to establish a union.

In 2002, the State Department condemned elections in the Ukraine. Among the problems cited were that employees were pressured to support the ruling party; university administrators told students how to vote; and the ruling party dominated the media while restricting the opposition's access to TV and billboards.

Many of the tactics used to intimidate U.S. employees are legal. However, because federal labor law contains no possibility of punitive fines, prison, or any other type of sanction, employers also break the law at will. Last year, approximately 15,000 Americans were illegally fired, suspended or otherwise financially punished for trying to form a union. If federal elections were run with the same lawlessness as the workplace, the 2004 election would have seen 7.5 million Americans fired, demoted or fined for backing the "wrong" candidate.

An election where one party gets preferred access to the voter list, dominates communications, forces all voters to attend its rallies, and fires voters for backing the opposition is undemocratic and un-American.

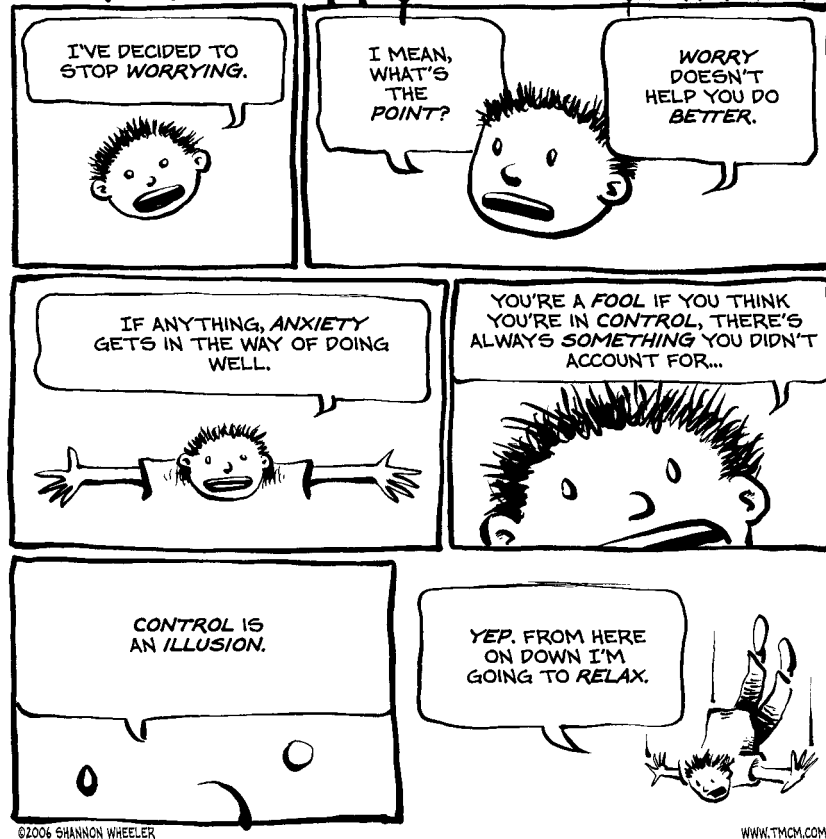
Anyone who is serious about workplace democracy has to start by insisting that we have at least as high standards for American workers as we do for voters abroad.



Gordon Lafer is a political scientist at the UO and is the author of Free and Fair? How Labor Law Fails U.S. Democratic Election Standards (2005).

How to Be Happy

by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

GIVE 'EM HELL, DEB

I'd like to thank Debra Merskin for her staggering expose (column, 8/24) on the dastardly and nefarious ways of pirates. Finally, the truth is out! No longer will the public adore pirates as being simple oddly dressed cockney-speaking, cyclopean, amputee parrot-fanciers! Instead, they will see the dark truth, that these notorious "buccaneers" did indeed — gasp! — take things that were not theirs, and oftentimes hurt people!

Stylized versions of the past are a moral atrocity in themselves! Romanticism and fantasy must be crushed and destroyed wherever they lurk! I look forward to Ms. Merskin's future works of investigative journalism wherein she will hopefully bring to light the dark secrets of ninjas, cowboys, Vikings, samurai, cavemen, musketeers, and medieval knights, as well as the special "holiday edition" of her column wherein she explains to small children that the real Santa Claus has been dead for quite some time.

Give 'em hell, Deb!

Joseph Streckert
Eugene

CHOPPED-UP EUGENE

Regarding your cover story about City Hall, "Doomed To Demo" (8/17), I'd like to add my two cents as someone who works in Eugene and Corvallis.

On one hand you have the city of Corvallis, with a vibrant artistic downtown filled with small businesses and buildings that convey the homey sense of a small town community. Then there's Eugene, filled with concrete structures that bisect the downtown area and loom over empty storefronts. If you don't believe me, go to both towns at Christmas and observe the amount of downtown shoppers.

The writer of the article obviously favors rebuilding these concrete monoliths that are almost 50 years old. Where is the Eugene that once had its main street (Willamette) running from the butte and train station through downtown? Willamette is chopped up by the

ugly 1950s-designed Hilton and part of the Hult Center and shaded by concrete parking garages. Surrounding streets are metered for little or no parking, designed to speed any visitor through downtown as fast as possible.

Yes, rebuilding Eugene's currently earthquake-unsafe city center will cost money — but the result can and should be a kinder, gentler, friendlier downtown that serves the people. Other city and county agencies can be incorporated into a new downtown plan — an example is LCARA, which would benefit by having homeless animals available within walking distance to anyone interested in a new friend. Currently one has to drive miles to get to LCARA or Greenhill.

Maybe a police station that doesn't resemble the set of "Dragnet" would help the citizens warm up to those that protect and serve. Perhaps many local businesses could benefit from a new look downtown. Hello? Eugene CAN do it — contrary to the naysayer writer of your cover story.

Marc Time
Junction City

WORLD CLASS OSF

Though overall a decent plug for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Suzi Steffen's review (cover story 8/24) sells these theater experiences short with her evaluation of the quality of the six plays she saw (*Merry Wives of Windsor*, *A Winter's Tale*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *King John*, and *Bus Stop*) and her subjective grading system. These are not high school plays. Her grades seems inappropriate and somewhat childish.

The following information may provide insight into the reference point for our assessment of the OSF productions. Two years ago we had the good fortune to see Ralph Fiennes in London, England in Ibsen's *Brand*, as well as Joan Plowright in a Pirandello play, *Absolutely, Perhaps*, and the Royal Shakespeare's production of *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* at the Old Vic Theatre. Upon our return, we attended several plays at OSF. Just recently we returned from New York City,