

Union experiment was a failure

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Last month employees of Kingston Dodge Chrysler voted to decertify Canadian Autoworkers (CAW) Local 1837. You could call it “an experiment that just didn’t work out.”

This tale started five years ago when the CAW began a campaign to organize some of the staff at the dealership. The office and sales staff were not included; only the technicians, service advisers, parts department employees, body shop employees and the cleanup departments. I’m a parts department employee and I was never asked to sign up for the union or even whether I wanted to unionize.

One group of employees welcomed the union and another group opposed unionization. There was a third group of undecided employees and most of them ultimately voted in favour of certifying Local 1837.

Immediately after certification, the feeling in the building changed as many people began associating only with those who were like-minded. It affected everyone, whether they were part of the union or not. People even did things like stay away from Christmas parties.

A year later, in April and May of 1998, there was a seven-and-a-half-week strike that was settled with the signing of a three-year deal. All non-union employees and a number of bargaining unit employees crossed picket lines and worked all through the strike. There were several complaints and incidents involving customers crossing the picket line but, thankfully, things were quite orderly overall.

The most frightening part of the whole experience was how people who were working peacefully side by side days or even hours before the strike suddenly changed and became rude, crude and disrespectful towards their peers.

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A number of employees who had initially been undecided about unionization but ultimately had voted for it began to feel they had been mistaken in casting their ballot for the union. Consequently, an attempt to decertify the local started in March 2001, during the “open period that occurs during the final days of a contract. The attempt failed by one vote and it became clear that support for the company and the CAW was split.

The contract expired in May 2001. The two sides went back to the bargaining table and reached a tentative agreement in August. Between mid-August and mid-November, three votes were taken on two contract proposals, and each time the agreement was turned down. During the same period, two votes were taken to approve strike action and neither garnered the sixty-six-and-two-thirds response required to take to the streets.

At this point the CAW ship was dead in the water.

The filing of the conciliator’s report in November brought about the setting aside of the old agreement, meaning that for the last four months there has been no contract in force. Since then neither party has had to abide by any of the terms of the previous deal. When given the choice

of having union dues deducted or not deducted from paycheques, approximately three-quarters of the members declined to have dues deducted. About three months ago, employees were given the wage increases that would have happened had the contract been ratified. We rejoiced when, on Jan. 1, the profit-sharing program that had been discontinued five years ago was reinstated.

A meeting between concerned employees, our CAW representative and the company, under the supervision of an Ontario Labour Relations Board official, was called for late February. At that time it was mutually agreed to hold a vote asking the question: “Do you wish to be represented by the CAW or not?” All but one of the 37 eligible employees cast ballots and the results of that vote were 25 favouring the company and 11 favouring the CAW.

In response to the overwhelming statement by the employees, the CAW has agreed to immediately abandon its bargaining rights at Kingston Dodge Chrysler.

Having survived the past nearly five years of turmoil, it is clear to me that there is no place in a customer-service type of business for the old-fashioned, adversarial, one-size-fits-all unionism that we experienced at Kingston Dodge Chrysler. No one knows how many customers have been lost. That is the real cost to us all.

I believe many lessons have been learned by many people and that we can repair any damage that has been done. This has been an experiment that will serve as a lesson for all Kingston-area automobile dealers.

Steve Williams
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