

Last year a surfing buddy ~~of mine~~ invited me to a picnic at Freshwater Park, and so I went. It seemed fair, because I had been inviting him to church for some time, and he came. So I ~~thought it would be fair to return the favor.~~ I had a good time. When the same picnic rolled around again this Father's Day weekend, I was feeling busy, but decided to drop by once again. Truth was I did not know many people at the picnic even though I did know the organizer of the event. So, my expectations for social interactions were low and I figured I'd eat and run. Sitting down with a tasty bit of ~~salad and~~ tri tip, I found the people around me warm, friendly, and easy to engage in conversation. We talked about a lot of things like family, friendships, economy and even religion. In sum, I was ~~very~~ favorably impressed in my interactions at the two picnics of the Local 290 Plumbers and Steamfitters Union.

In the past I'd had few interactions with unions, and I confess to harboring some negative thoughts about who the unions are and what they do. The first image coming to my mind when you mentioned Unions would have been Teamsters, Jimmy Hoffa, and cement boots.

But stereotyping unions based on Jimmy Hoffa is about as fair as judging the church based only on the Crusades, or medicine on the ancient practice of leeches and bleeding. True, some bad stuff happened, but the errors of the past do not tell the whole story.

So, in order to find out more about our local Plumbers and Steamfitters Union I went down to their hall on California street a couple of days ago and got an education from my friend Craig Spjut, who is the Business Agent-training coordinator for UA Local 290. Local 290 was founded in Humboldt in 1904; it is affiliated with the AFL-CIO and covers a pretty big region, roughly from Eureka north to most of Oregon and just across the Columbia River. They have about 4300 members.

What impressed me most is the way members of Local 290 are not only seeking ~~for~~ fair wages in providing services that are essential to our society, but also the way they pass on their skills through their apprenticeship programs. Any individual who is willing to work hard and put the time in can learn a vital trade—and in time will make a very decent living. It seems to me that apprenticeship is rapidly vanishing in an age of hi tech gadgets where the younger tend to be better than the more senior members of our society.

Reading the union constitution and looking around the shop, it surprised me to see how difficult and high are the work standards for the apprenticeship programs. But I was even more surprised at how few seem to be applying for apprenticeships and then graduating to the level of journeyman. That's sad, because in a day and age when the salaries of working people are lagging far behind, skilled work and highly skilled workers are both needed for a number of reasons. Previously, I'd thought we can't afford unions, but take a look at Germany. Germans have plenty of unions and skilled workers, and their economy is thriving.

In my opinion, our country cannot successfully compete in the international market place if workers are under appreciated and work undervalued. I, for one, would like to see that turned around.

This has been Dan Price for Community Comment