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# QWL from a Labor Perspective: A Review Essay on *Inside the Circle*

■ Ruth Needleman

Early union advocates of quality of worklife (QWL) programs envisioned a movement to reform the workplace and to re-educate management to recognize and reward workers for their intelligence, resourcefulness and skills. Today QWL has become almost synonymous with labor-management cooperation, a national campaign whose stated goal is economic revitalization of U.S. industries. According to business and government, cooperation is a prerequisite for restoring the United States' economic fortunes.

Unions are being pressured to commit personnel and resources to promote QWL. While emphasizing mutuality of interests, business has in practice been more persuasive in its use of economic blackmail. On the one hand, corporations promise increased employee participation and a more satisfying work environment. On the other hand, they warn unions that any reluctance on their part to cooperate could translate into plant closures and "union-avoidance" programs.

Unions face a limited and difficult set of choices, given the

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deteriorating state of manufacturing industries, the increased export of jobs and labor's own declining membership, bargaining power and public image. By no means does organized labor contest the need for improved cooperation. In fact, through collective bargaining and effective grievance procedures, unions have always sought to eliminate antagonisms from the workplace. But the current anti-labor environment casts a shadow over new management initiatives for cooperation, and has provoked extensive debate among unionists on the pros and cons of QWL. Many question the motives of management and, for that matter, of the Reagan administration for endorsing QWL programs so enthusiastically. After all, the National Association of Manufacturers refers to its own union-busting front group as "The Committee for Positive Labor Relations" (formerly the Committee for a Union-Free Environment).

What criteria, then, should unions use in deciding whether to participate in a QWL program? Can a union accurately measure an employer's "sincerity" in urging cooperation? In committing itself and its members to QWL, what steps can a union take to protect and strengthen its own role? For unions, these are critical questions, and while rewards exist, the risks are even greater.

These decisions are further complicated by the serious lack of labor-oriented resources or training materials. The vast quantity of QWL material in existence is either designed for management personnel or for *joint* labor-management groups. Although many international unions have issued statements of principle, guidelines and checklists to assist locals in making decisions about QWL, no systematic study or training manual has been compiled with the express purpose of helping unions protect their interests within a QWL process.

*Inside the Circle: A Union Guide to QWL* by Mike Parker represents an important breakthrough on this front. The book examines a variety of union experiences with QWL, detailing the problems and pitfalls in existing programs, while at the same time providing ideas and guidelines on how unions can participate to their own advantage. A union activist, Parker draws heavily on his background in QWL. Throughout the book, he analyzes the ideological assumptions and organizational structures of QWL programs which, left unmonitored, work in favor of management and to the detriment of unionism.

The author's overall evaluation of QWL is negative; he characterizes the programs as consciously designed to undermine unions. Although he cannot really substantiate this view, since employers differ markedly in motivation as well as behavior,

nonetheless he provides convincing examples of how many current QWL practices are creating serious problems for local unions. Whatever position a union may take on QWL, no leader or rank-and-file member can afford to dismiss the problems Parker details nor ignore his warnings.

### **Pitfalls of QWL**

What are these problems? Perhaps the most serious is the tendency of labor-management cooperation ventures to weaken a worker's identification with his/her union—in other words, to erode union consciousness. Parker highlights this in describing the joint training sessions which have as a main objective "to establish new group identities to replace the old..." "QWL training," Parker explains, "is designed to get people to act on the ideas that 'we and management are all in the same boat.' " Team members become conditioned to see one set of common problems, one set of interests and one set of solutions as well. Workers are discouraged from functioning as union representatives within QWL unless specifically designated as such. The traditional adversarial relationship, so basic to trade union consciousness, is not only downplayed but discouraged as "disruptive." Emphasis is on the individual thinking and acting on his/her own initiative. The irony, of course, is that management participants "continue to be directly tied in to the management structure. They report to and carry out the instructions of a superior."

Efforts to build team identity come at the expense of union identity and compound an already critical problem among union members. Since a worker's ties to the union are voluntary, they are "only as strong as their conscious identification with the union." Unfortunately, a sizeable number of union members today do not participate actively in their unions nor do they have a strong commitment to unionism. To the degree that a worker finds satisfaction or solves workplace problems through QWL, she/he may turn increasingly to QWL rather than to the union. This tendency plays directly into the hands of employers anxious to move "beyond unions." According to an AFL-CIO-initiated study of five QWL programs, over 23% of the participants reported that QWL had a negative effect on membership identification with the union, and a total of 63% claimed either a negative or no effect.

Another related problem *Inside the Circle* examines has to do with union solidarity. How does QWL affect relationships among workers in a department or between different locals and plants? In his chapter "Undermining the Union Idea," Parker explores the competitive environment generated through QWL programs.

"QWL promotes competition," since, according to Parker, "the strongest argument most unions make for participation in QWL is that through it jobs will be saved, as workers use American ingenuity to make American industry competitive with foreign producers."

This competitive race does not stop at the nation's borders. A phenomenon called "whipsawing" has become commonplace; a company pits different locals against each other by announcing that it will close the least productive facility. Panicked to save their own jobs, workers devise methods to raise production or lower costs, even at the expense of basic contract rights, including seniority. What's more, as a team endeavors to solve a production "bottleneck," it inevitably measures the work behavior of team members. The statistical methods of problem-solving taught in QWL lead workers to accept "...that some workers should cooperate with management to determine which workers are not measuring up to company standards."

Pressure to improve performance to save jobs in one department or workplace breaks down the bonds of solidarity among workers. Instead of "an injury to one is an injury to all," some workers begin to regard another's "injury" as their own possible gain. Certainly one of the theoretical foundations of QWL—to protect American industry from foreign competition—has undermined international labor solidarity at a time when multinational domination makes it even more essential for labor.

Another problem Parker emphasizes is the degree to which QWL programs accommodate management's goals so much more readily than labor's. In part this is because areas of "mutual interest"—which are the main concern of QWL—are directly related to output, productivity and quality. Strengthening job security and union identification do not qualify as "mutual interests." As a result, QWL channels both labor and management resources into improving the company's profitability. In addition, QWL had its origins in management's search for more effective ways to motivate people to work harder. As *Inside the Circle* explains, pioneering QWL programs prescribed no role for unions and were often used by non-union companies as a preventative measure against unionization.

What are management's goals in QWL? Ostensibly management wants to scale down costs and improve the quality of its product or service, and is willing to arrange trade-offs with labor to attain these objectives. But to achieve greater efficiency and productivity, according to Parker, management actually pursues the following goals: 1) to gain access to workers' knowledge about the work

Cartoon from *Inside the Circle*



process; 2) to reduce resistance to new technology; 3) to establish more flexibility in the workplace; 4) to exact more contract concessions; and 5) to undermine unionism. What Parker argues—and argues well—is that the trade-offs unions gain in exchange for accommodating management goals may not be worth the cost involved.

*Inside the Circle* goes on to examine what is at stake in meeting each of the goals. When a worker shares his/her knowledge of the work process with management, for example, she/he loses the last vestiges of control retained in the wake of Taylorism's deskilling of manufacturing jobs. Parker refers to this phenomenon sardonically as "improved Taylorism." Management uses this knowledge to restructure jobs "more efficiently," to automate them or even to eliminate them. Even if the workers are "reimbursed" by improved work conditions, wages or job security, management can implement the same changes in other plants without conceding anything to the workforce there.

Management's drive for flexibility translates into fewer job classifications and modification of seniority provisions for overtime, job assignments and even promotions or recall rights. Parker's own experience with the skilled trades in the auto industry provides graphic examples of how management has used

QWL to institute far-reaching changes in work rules, job classifications and descriptions.

Some of the best sections of *Inside the Circle* address the complex relationship between QWL and collective bargaining. Here Parker comes to grips directly with an issue too often swept under the rug. Unions have been apprehensive about QWL because they fear that it will interfere with the grievance procedure and collective bargaining. To safeguard the bargaining process, unions have demanded provisions in QWL guidelines which insure that contract issues will not be handled through QWL. Bargaining and QWL, unions have insisted, must be kept separate.

The reality, however, has been much to the contrary. There is not a union QWL facilitator or participant who can in honesty deny that contractual issues get addressed in the circles. In an effort to clarify the problem, unions have tried making a distinction between issues covered by the contract and issues controlled by management. According to this line of thought, QWL enables unions to discuss management rights areas and effect changes which unions otherwise could not achieve. But every work-related issue is potentially a subject for negotiations. Parker questions the motives of a company that refuses to discuss an item at the bargaining table only to pursue it later through QWL. What Parker maintains—and this seems to be the only realistic position—is that the two cannot be separated and that unions can best protect the integrity of collective bargaining by agreeing on the proper role of QWL *within* the bargaining process.

Parker goes on to outline the "costs of separation," problems which emerge because of the union's reluctance to acknowledge that QWL is a form of bargaining. The first is that the "union stops trying to expand the territory of collective bargaining." In Parker's own words, "the areas turned over to QWL are the ones on the cutting edge of labor relations—introduction of technology, work rules, work methods and even the product or service produced." One result is that members look to QWL rather than the union to deal with these issues. This narrowing of collective bargaining could further promote the view that unions are less relevant in today's world.

A second "cost" of trying to maintain a separation involves the impact on stewards who may become confused or demoralized. Since the steward is the backbone of the union and its main contact with the membership, anything that weakens his/her position will hurt the union. Parker lists the following problems QWL may create for the union representative: 1) Members stop filing

grievances and instead take their complaints to the QWL circle. 2) Leaders become so immersed in QWL that they devote less time to grievances and slow down the procedure. 3) Stewards become isolated within the department, either because they do not have the time to participate in QWL or because they sit in as "watchdogs." 4) Stewards are expected to wear two hats—to be adversarial in the grievance procedure but "family" in QWL. 5) Since management chooses which procedure will work, QWL or the grievance procedure, the steward's effectiveness is undermined.

### **Parker's Guidelines**

For the union to retain control in bargaining and in its relations with management, Parker advocates one of two options. Either the union "can force the company to drop the program altogether, or it can decide to participate fully." Any other position leaves the initiative and control of QWL in management's hands. This is wise advice, and although Parker favors rejection of QWL, he nonetheless provides excellent suggestions for building the union through QWL.

To avoid the bargaining/QWL dilemma, for example, Parker puts forward three helpful guidelines: 1) Establish union-management negotiating sessions to screen topics proposed by QWL. 2) Communicate to management a clear union policy that what it refuses in collective bargaining it cannot give through QWL. 3) Regard QWL as a first step in the bargaining process.

"The union must develop," writes Parker, "its own goals and strategy before it enters 'joint' activities." This is the cornerstone of a union strategy. In practice it means separate union education, planning *and* training, including the use of *labor* consultants, if necessary, to help the union develop its guidelines and orient its members. There is no reason why QWL training cannot be designed to increase union involvement and to educate members on the contract, grievance procedures and labor history. Even joint sessions should incorporate information on the union, its goals, achievements and history. In fact some unions have used their fulltime facilitators as internal organizers, taking advantage of their direct access to a broad cross-section of the membership.

*Inside the Circle* also offers a wealth of tips on how to avoid common QWL pitfalls. The union facilitator job, for example, represents a potential source of problems, due to the influence a facilitator can have on the membership and on the QWL program. Parker recommends that the facilitator be part of the union leadership, and that the facilitator's training include basic

union education and labor perspectives on technology, health and safety and other critical workplace issues. Parker urges unions to set clear policies to regulate overtime, bumping, promotions and wage rates for facilitators to discourage any careerism. Setting restrictions on eligibility to run for union office may also help to minimize internal political dissension.

Another important contribution of the book comes in its discussion of how to avoid job loss. Parker calls for a "job impact evaluation" to be built into the QWL procedure, so that every proposal is screened to determine its potential effect on jobs. Teams can be encouraged to select projects which create jobs, and if a project might reduce the number of jobs, alternate projects could be developed to compensate for the projected loss.

Suggestions for building a union-conscious QWL program appear throughout the book, although the organization of the chapters sometimes buries important materials. The very last chapter on research, for example, could easily be skipped by someone not interested in bibliography. But it is here that Parker discusses the actual track record of existing QWLs. His critique of existing literature is right on target. Parker notes that most QWL case studies are written by consultants and practitioners who have a stake in the results; they do not examine failures. Outside researchers, on the other hand, rarely gain access to programs which are in trouble. What this final chapter makes clear is just how inconclusive the research to date is, further underlining the need for union leaders to proceed with caution.

The most serious shortcoming of *Inside the Circle* stems from its overly narrow focus on the auto industry. This leads to generalizations which do not always apply to other workplaces, and also leads the author to skip over certain problems and advantages of QWL, based on other union experiences. Parker focuses almost exclusively on large, centralized manufacturing plants, while many programs are being developed in decentralized workplaces. Moreover, the book concentrates too much on problems of the crafts, while paying little attention to the effects of QWL on women and minorities in the workplace.

Overall, however, *Inside the Circle* is an excellent study of QWL, shedding new insight onto many of the negative aspects while pointing a way forward for unions committed to QWL programs. While unions need to pursue every avenue possible to protect members and secure jobs, they must instill a union identity in workers and strengthen union organizations, because in the long run the union is the only real security for the American worker. ■