Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Describe the grievance procedure.
2. Discuss the historical evolution of grievance arbitration.
3. Describe the functions of grievance procedures and arbitration.
4. Explain how arbitration works.
5. Discuss the connections between grievance procedures and the other aspects of the labor management relationship.
6. Discuss alternatives to the grievance procedure in the union sector.
7. Explain the evolution of worker and union participation.
8. Examine the links between teamwork, participants, and work restructuring.
9. Discuss the debate surrounding participatory programs.
10. Discuss board representation and employee ownership.

Written Lecture

Unit VI begins our examination of the workplace level of industrial relations. The focus in the beginning of this unit is on the day-to-day employment relationship. In unionized settings this involves contract administration below the level of formal contract negotiations. Collective bargaining agreements in the US are elaborate and detailed documents. Engrained in US collective bargaining is the principle that “management acts and the union reacts,” or, put another way, “it is management's job to manage and the union's job to grieve.” This has led unionized setting to reliance on grievance and arbitration procedures as mechanisms to resolve conflicts that arise at the workplace. In recent years in unionized settings, competitive environmental conditions and the increasingly complex needs of the labor force are giving rise to efforts to supplement formal contract administration procedures with more flexible mechanisms for resolving problems and conflict.

We will also cover participatory processes. Unionized industrial relations systems now face intense environmental pressures, including those arising from the lower costs found in many nonunion workplace systems in the US and developing countries. The US is in the midst of a transition from an industrial to a knowledge-based economy. This type of economy relies on human capital, worker skills, and commitment to add value to technology, financial resources, and other organizational assets. Taken together these developments are creating strong pressures on collective bargaining to adapt and better meet the needs and interests of contemporary workers and employers.

In this unit we also explore the experiences to date of efforts by unions and management representatives to introduce various joint change and improvement efforts into their bargaining relationships. The starting point for most of these efforts is participatory processes that involve individual workers and union representatives in decision making. In many cases these participatory processes provide informal mechanisms of worker involvement that are supplements or alternatives to the grievance and arbitration procedures.