Look for the Union Label

In order to form a more perfect union, many of my ancestors joined one. My maternal grandfather was a train conductor, my paternal grandfather a New York City police officer, my uncle a fire captain in the Big Apple. Around my dinner table as a kid, working people were revered, evil corporate bosses vilified. Unions were big in Levittown, New York.

And I am a union guy as well. AFTRA (the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists) has represented me for more than 30 years. And they’ve been good. When the King World Company tried to dodge pension payments for “Inside Edition” employees (of which I was one) in the early 1990s, AFTRA took them on and won a settlement. Without the union, we would have been hosed.

But now things are different in America. Over the years, some powerful unions, representing both public and private workers, have succeeded in gaining so many benefits that the entire U.S. economy has been damaged. Many states cannot pay health and pension benefits because the tax revenue is not nearly enough to cover expenses. Also, millions of jobs formerly held by Americans are now done by Chinese and Indian people because labor is so much cheaper in those countries.

Thus, we have economic warfare between the cost-cutters and the union folks who want to protect what they have.

While I am absolutely sympathetic to hard working union folks, I truly understand the danger of the United States government not being able to pay its bills. Chinese investors currently own more than a trillion dollars of U.S. debt and our nation is more than $14 trillion in the red. President Obama recently put forth a budget for 2012 that would add another trillion dollars to that total.

That, of course, is insane.
If Chinese investors unload their U.S. investments, our economy would collapse. That is not a good place to be. In order for America to continue to drive the world’s economy, we must return to a responsible spending spreadsheet, and that means union give-backs. It also means a decline in union negotiating power, especially in the public arena.

Many liberal Americans continue to scream about raising taxes to bring down the debt. But that crushes economic expansion. Corporations and rich folks will only take so much taxation before they leave the building, as Elvis once did.

Capitalism is a tough system. It’s not touchy-feely like Sweden, where cradle-to-grave entitlements rule. But there are less than ten million Swedes, so they work it out. With more than 300 million Americans, we can’t “provide” for everyone.

The cold truth is that unions are on the way out. High tech means big changes in the workplace, and labor protections are not needed as much as they once were. What we are seeing in Wisconsin is the beginning of a new attitude toward the American worker. And there will be pain until we get things sorted out.