**Episode 1: What do Unions Do?**

“Hi Tiffany, I’m sorry I’m late for our interview. I got lost trying to find this conference room.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Sorry?”

“Nothing, I was just making a joke.”

“Look at this map. See? This room isn’t even on the map.”

“Yeah, this place is really big.”

“Anyhow, I made it. Let’s get started. Okay, your resume says here that you pursued a PhD in Human Resources. It’s unusual to have so much formal training in our field. I’m not too sure how a PhD in Human Resources works. Can you tell me a little bit about the kind of work you did in school?”

“Of course. I love my thesis work.”

“Great. Tell me about your thesis.”

“My thesis begins with a paradox, but it is not so paradoxical once you open up the black box. The average American woman wears clothing that is a size fourteen. Most designers only design up to a size ten or twelve. It doesn’t seem to make sense until you factor in the discriminatory practices of fashion designers. My thesis addresses this discrimination component. I try to understand the nature of the social movement of plus size women in their fight against clothing designers who resist producing plus size clothing options.”

“I think I see. So you’re interested in social movements?”

“What I really want to do is resurrect the literature on unions and collective bargaining. Labor unions representing unskilled workers in collective bargaining with management might be likened to the social movement of plus size women in their fight to access mainstream fashion against a more powerful fashion industry and their oppressive standards of beauty.”

“So you’re interested in unions and collective bargaining and it has something to do with the plus-size fashion industry?”

“Well, I really like studying economics.”

“Economics?”

“The economics of plus size fashion are fascinating. Did you know it is more difficult to produce clothing for plus size women? Fat deposits differently in women who are overweight—some might be small on top, but large on the bottom. There is greater variation in proportions for this group of women, which means it’s much harder to scale a pattern. Also, it requires more fabric and material to produce plus size garments. Much of this cost cannot be passed onto the consumer and so margins for plus size clothing are smaller. Another reason is that the production of plus size clothing might require new machinery that can accommodate bigger bolts of fabric. And another reason is that plus size women are less likely to purchase high-priced items because their weight tends to fluctuate a lot—frequently up to two sizes within a year. Also, it takes up more shelf space to stock a greater variety of sizes, which limits the variety of options retailers can show.”

“Okay, the economics are really interesting. I followed that. I’m not sure how this all connects together, though.”

“Well, major designers have come out to say that their clothing would look awful on plus size women. This is the motivation for why I wanted to study discrimination and the nature of the social movement of plus size women against the fashion industry.”

“Wait, we’re back on the topic of social movements?”

“Yes. I want to revolutionize the social justice literature.”

“You’re interested in social justice? Does that have to do with social movements?”

 “It’s all connected.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure I can articulate this. The plus size fashion industry is a metaphor for social justice. And the economics are sort of there and interesting, but that’s not my focus. But, it’s really interesting.”

“I’m not sure I’m following. So, what did you find?”

“Well, I couldn’t exactly identify the plus size social movement.”

“What do you mean?”

“I just couldn’t identify it. I mean, there are now magazine articles about the life of the fashionably plus-sized, token plus size models on runways, token issues of *Vogue* dedicated to voluptuous women, and a trade show of models, vendors and designers that is billed as a plus sized fashion week. These provide evidence that perhaps some sort of collective action exists.

“So there is a social movement?”

“No, it is unclear if there is solidarity amongst plus size women. Some want to cultivate a plus size fashion industry that rivals the large designers of missy-sized clothing and others want these large designers to include them in their sizing. One constituency wants civil war and the other wants civil rights. Some even want both. All in all, I find so much fragmentation, with no clear dominant narrative emerging, that I could not identify the movement with confidence.”

“So there isn’t a social movement?”

“Plus size women don’t shop like other women. They can’t go from store to store looking for items. They browse and shop online. One entrepreneur said that her brick-and-mortar plus size business was losing money until she went online. Something like 70% of her revenues comes from online sales. Plus size women, as shoppers, seem pretty isolated from each other. To further complicate things, their social identity also changes with their size.”

“You didn’t identify the movement before you started. Why?”

“If I knew for sure there was a movement, *a priori*,then it would be a type of movement we already knew existed. I thought that I would find something new.”

“I see. So we don’t know if there’s a social movement?”

“Right.”

“So, your thesis is?”

“You really never get to hear about the wrong ones.”

“Okay. I’m not sure I processed all this yet.”

“Now that I’m thinking about it, I don’t really know if I believe there is any injustice here anymore. Designers have a taste for discrimination because they discriminate by definition.

“Then designers keep us employed.”

“You know, I would hate to be an artist. You’re really just finding new ways of bringing inequality into the world.”

“Look. It doesn’t take a Picasso to do the work that’s required here. I mean, most of our HR staff has learned their roles on the job. One woman rose to the VP position by working her way up from the call center. We liked your resume because you’re an anomaly. You have an academic background in HR and we want to round out our team with both types of people. But, I need you to understand what this job is. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Let me tell you about what we deal with here. A guy, last week, takes off his pants during lunch and proceeds to show and tell in the lunch room. What would you do? Fire him, right? Well, we can’t because the union got a list of his medications and found he recently started on some meds and they say that it caused him to go a little loopy. And, honestly, the public relations stink it would create to fire him and the added legal fees make it irrational for us to fire him. The other day, one of our guys was told to build three piles of sand. So, he did, then he took a piss on one of them. What do you do? Fire him? We want to automate our collection system and the union won’t let us. What do we do?”

“We didn’t exactly learn how to bust unions in school. You don’t have a cooperative relationship with the unions?”

“No.”

“Do they want higher wages and more benefits?”

“They always want that. Really, some of these union leaders are voted in by a small majority of union members who actually vote. Many of these leaders are not that well educated—particularly in the unskilled trades—but they are powerful and it’s difficult to negotiate with them. What do you do?”

“I don’t know.”

“I just want you to know what you’re signing yourself up for. I’ve seen your type before. It would be in your best interest and our best interest to be on the same page about this.”

“No. I completely understand. We are on the same page. I’ve studied unions for years, but have never met one. This would be a great opportunity.”

“Okay. I just wanted to make sure you understood. So, you graduated last fall? Have you worked since then?”

“No. I’ve just been recruiting.”

“How’s the job market out there?”

“Oh, well, they say it’s getting better. It is. It is getting better. Well, you’re probably in a better position to answer that question.”

“I can only speak for us. We’ve been steady. Our headcount is pretty stable.”

“Okay.”

“Is that it? Any other questions for me?”

“No. That’s all on my side. Do you have any other questions for me?”

“Well, just one more question. We want to study whether unionized workers have greater job satisfaction than non-unionized workers. How would you determine that?”

“Oh wow. I see. I’ve never heard of such a question. I think. I think you could split your workforce into two groups—unionized and non-unionized. So, for the same job, I would survey those in the unionized position about their job satisfaction and then do the same for those in the non-unionized position. That will allow you to determine whether unionized workers have greater or lesser job satisfaction.”

“What if, for the same position, we only have unionized workers?”

“I see. Well, you can survey people at another company who aren’t unionized and see what their job satisfaction rate is.”

“You want us to run a survey in another company?”

“Well, I guess.”

“Can you think about an alternative way of going about measuring the impact of unionization on job satisfaction?”

“Not really. No.”

“Anything more creative maybe?”

“I’m not sure. No. Not really.”

“Okay, well, those are all my questions.”

“Thank you. It was nice meeting you. The union anecdotes were really interesting. I’ve never heard of anything like it before.”