

## 8: The National Labor Relations Board- Organization and Functions

### Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the process that leads to recognition of bargaining units by the National Labor Relations Board.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) consists of five board members, appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate, who serve for five-year, staggered terms. The president designates one of the members as chairman. The president also appoints the general counsel, who is in charge of the board's investigatory and prosecutorial functions and who represents the NLRB when it goes (or is taken) to court. The general counsel also oversees the thirty-three regional offices scattered throughout the country, each of which is headed by a regional director.

The NLRB serves two primary functions: (1) it investigates allegations of unfair labor practices and provides remedies in appropriate cases, and (2) it decides in contested cases which union should serve as the exclusive bargaining agent for a particular group of employees.

### Unfair Labor Practice Cases

Unfair labor practice cases are fairly common; some twenty-two thousand unfair labor practice claims were filed in 2008. Volume was considerably higher thirty years ago; about forty thousand a year was typical in the early 1980s. A charge of an unfair labor practice must be presented to the board, which has no authority to initiate cases on its own. Charges are investigated at the regional level and may result in a complaint by the regional office. A regional director's failure to issue a complaint may be appealed to the general counsel, whose word is final (there is no possible appeal).

A substantial number of charges are dismissed or withdrawn each year—sometimes as many as 70 percent. Once issued, the complaint is handled by an attorney from the regional office. Most cases, usually around 80 percent, are settled at this level. If not settled, the case will be tried before an administrative law judge, who will take evidence and recommend a decision and an order. If no one objects, the decision and order become final as the board's opinion and order. Any party may appeal the decision to the board in Washington. The board acts on written briefs, rarely on oral argument. The board's order may be appealed to the US court of appeals, although its findings of fact are not reviewable "if supported by substantial evidence on the record considered as a whole." The board may also go to the court of appeals to seek enforcement of its orders.

### Representation Cases

The NLRB is empowered to oversee representative elections—that is, elections by employees to determine whether or not to be represented by a union. The board becomes involved if at least 30 percent of the members of a potential bargaining unit petition it to do so or if an employer petitions on being faced with a claim by a union that it exclusively represents the employees. The board determines which bargaining unit is appropriate and which employees are eligible to vote. A representative of the regional office will conduct the election itself, which is by secret ballot. The regional director may hear challenges to the election procedure to determine whether the election was valid.

### Key Takeaway

The NLRB has two primary functions: (1) it investigates allegations of unfair labor practices and provides remedies in appropriate cases, and (2) it decides in contested cases which union should serve as the exclusive bargaining agent for a particular group of employees.

### Exercises 8.1

1. Go to the website for the NLRB. Find out how many unfair labor practice charges are filed each year. Also find out how many "have merit" according to the NLRB.
2. How many of these unfair labor practice charges that "have merit" are settled through the auspices of the NLRB?

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