PLAs: Neither ‘fair’ nor ‘balanced’

By Jim Waters

A favorite, but unproven, argument of union bosses is that government regulations favoring them result in higher-quality buildings and safer working conditions.

Such claims are being echoed – again, without proof – by Kentucky congressman Ed Whitfield.

Many readers shared my surprise in discovering last week that the Hopkinsville Republican voted to give the federal government the option of forcing nonunion contractors to sign Project Labor Agreements on large military construction projects.

Government-mandated PLAs force contractors who want to win federal construction contracts to:

- Recognize unions as the representatives of their employees on that job site.
- Use the union hiring hall to obtain most, if not all, of their workers.
- Pay into union pension and benefit plans even if contractors have their own plans.
- Obtain apprentices only through union programs.
- Obey restrictive and inefficient union work rules.

But the surprise doubled when I received the email response to my request for a statement explaining the congressman’s vote.

Press secretary Robert Sumner says his boss believes it’s “important that all workers have the best possible working conditions, and that on public works projects funded by the taxpayers, everything possible must be done to ensure a highly skilled, efficient workforce that can deliver projects on time and within budget.”

Talk about a slap in the face of Kentucky’s nonunion contractors. Ouch.

Suggesting the government needs to “have the option” of forcing union-like rules on contractors appallingly insinuates that those who build our offices, homes, investment properties and manufacturing facilities somehow or other do inferior work and cannot deliver.

Between the time President George W. Bush signed executive orders in 2001 protecting federally funded construction projects from PLAs and when President Obama signed his executive order in 2009 urging federal agencies to consider mandating PLAs, thousands of large federal projects – totaling more than $147 billion were built.

In a letter to Whitfield, the Associated Builders and Contractors of Kentuckiana point out that these projects, “despite the outright prohibition of government-mandated PLAs on any large (projects exceeding $25 million in total cost) or small federal construction projects, have been built safely, on-time and on-budget.”
Even Kentucky’s school superintendents know that coercive union-favoring regulations are not magic bullets for higher-quality projects.

A survey by the Kentucky Legislative Research Commission a few years back found that only 4 percent of the commonwealth’s 176 school superintendents believed requiring prevailing wages rates on school-construction projects – another union-friendly government mandate – results in “discernible, higher quality.”

 Forced PLAs also could have real economic impact on private contractors in Kentucky, where construction has been occurring at fever pitch at military institutions. According to the Fort Knox Public Relations Office, around $1 billion worth of construction occurred on post since the Base Realignment and Closure process began six years ago.

The naïveté continues: “Rep. Whitfield does not believe (PLAs) should be required in all circumstances. … This action … will preserve the option for the use of PLAs, without mandating their use.”

Seriously!

I wonder what kind of “circumstances” the congressman envisions that would result in any agency head that serves at the pleasure of the Obama administration, which rode to power on the backs of labor unions, not mandating the use of PLAs – especially in light of the reelection campaign. We’re talking here about military construction projects of at least $25 million, which means lots of loot finding its way into campaign coffers.

Finally: “Rep. Whitfield believes that is a balanced approach that will work in the taxpayers’ interest.”

But, as typically happens when government attempts to determine what’s “fair” and “balanced,” neither usually occurs.

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