



Whitfield's vote tilts playing field toward union contractors

By Jim Waters

Organized labor spent \$1 billion to get President Obama and other leftists elected in the last election. But it's politicians claiming conservatism who recently cast deciding votes to implement labor policies on military construction projects that have unions jumping for price-jacking joy.

In a real head scratcher, Hopkinsville Rep. Ed Whitfield and 26 of his fellow Republicans voted to allow the federal government to force nonunion contractors to sign project labor agreements as a condition for working on military construction projects.

The measure passed by a single vote, 204-203.

These agreements [drive up costs](#) by forcing nonunion workers to pay union dues and merit-shop contractors to contribute to unions' retirement packages as a condition for participating in these public-construction projects.

And when PLA projects are finished, nonunion workers move on without being allowed to take those benefits with them.

In a letter to its 450 members, the Kentuckiana Chapter of the Associated Builders and Contractors called it a "vote for waste and cronyism and ... a symptom of special interest favoritism that is eroding the integrity of the federal government."

It's not labor unions that are, in and of themselves, causing the decay of our political process. Rather, it's politicians that acquiesce to union bosses – with votes like Whitfield's – by using the blunt force of government to tilt the playing field in their favor and against the 87 percent of this country's workers who are not union members. Worse, taxpayers are forced to fund such schemes.

PLA mandates remove another advantage that nonunion contractors have: the ability to submit lower bids than union competitors because they work "as a team," said Tim Hunt, chairman of the Kentuckiana builders group.

"In the private sector, if a carpenter makes a mess, that carpenter cleans up the mess," Hunt said. "But union rules demand that a general laborer clean up the mess. The merit-shop approach is that while laborers may help carpenters, we work as a team."

Only 17 days after being sworn into office, Obama threatened this advantage for nonunion contractors by signing an [executive order](#) "encouraging" the use of union contractors and workers on federal construction projects that cost more than \$25 million.

When union rules dominate and carpenters can't clean up their own messes, the results are less-efficient performance and more laborers required – all of which drives up public construction costs. I'm assuming Whitfield knows that contractors are forced to add in those costs, which drive up their bids and result in union-like waste.

But if Whitfield keeps on, he may have his own political mess to clean up.

Hunt and his colleagues say they went to Whitfield's Washington office during the week of his PLA vote to meet with him.

“When we arrived and he found out what we were there to talk about, we had to settle for talking to an aid,” he said.

Builders did not settle for the Carter County school district [signing a PLA with a union group](#) to build the new Tygart Elementary School. [The PLA went away](#) after they filed suit, along with the \$1.1 million additional cost that the policy would have added to the school's price tag.

Also, Larry Hujo, a Jefferson County school board member who received \$120,000 from the local teachers union PAC in his 2008 campaign, was [stymied](#) in his effort to get pending construction at the city's Valley High School restricted to union labor.

There will be more votes on PLAs in the future. Before that happens, Hunt said “we're going to actually confront (Whitfield) with this. We've got to talk some sense into him.”

Talking sense to a career politician? Let me know how that goes, or if it even happens.

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