

Two-Sided Protest

Union members picket as business owner touts benefits



EDDIE MOORE/JOURNAL

Benjamin Lutes, general superintendent and safety director for Lone Sun Builders, holds one end of a banner in front of Hotel St. Francis on Thursday to counter people out front protesting Lone Sun's use of non-union labor.

By **PHIL PARKER**
Journal Staff Writer

Chet Karnas stood stone-faced at the front of Hotel St. Francis on Thursday morning as men paraded in an oval just a few feet away, loudly calling him and his company, Lone Sun

Builders, rats.

Karnas, Lone Sun's president, was there to protest the protesters.

"I was stone-faced because that's the best way to react to that kind of stuff," he said. "I'm not afraid."

Lone Sun is the subcontractor out of Albuquerque doing renovations inside

the hotel. Its employees are non-union, and a group of 20-plus men and women has gathered the last two days to march and chant against unfair wages and a lack of benefits for workers. Their signs said "Lone Sun Unfair" and touted them as members of Carpenters Local No. 1319.

For the second straight

day, none of the protesters would speak with the **Journal**. Two men standing across the street supervising the protest declined to go on the record as well.

Karnas said he pays his employees fair wages: "No single individual in this company makes less

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than \$11 an hour. Not one person." He said he also provides an ample benefits package including health care, a 401(k) plan with matching contributions, and life insurance.

He and two other Lone Sun employees were ready for Local 1319 on Thursday. Once the protest began, about 9 a.m., they unfurled their own sign — a banner that said, "Employee benefits and great wages. Our benefits: Health, dental and life insurance. Health reimbursements, pension and retirement. No membership dues." Upon the banner's unveiling, a boisterous and very sarcastic group laugh went up from the marchers.

"Don't mix it up with them," one of the union supervisors had told protesters before they began. "That's not what we're here for."

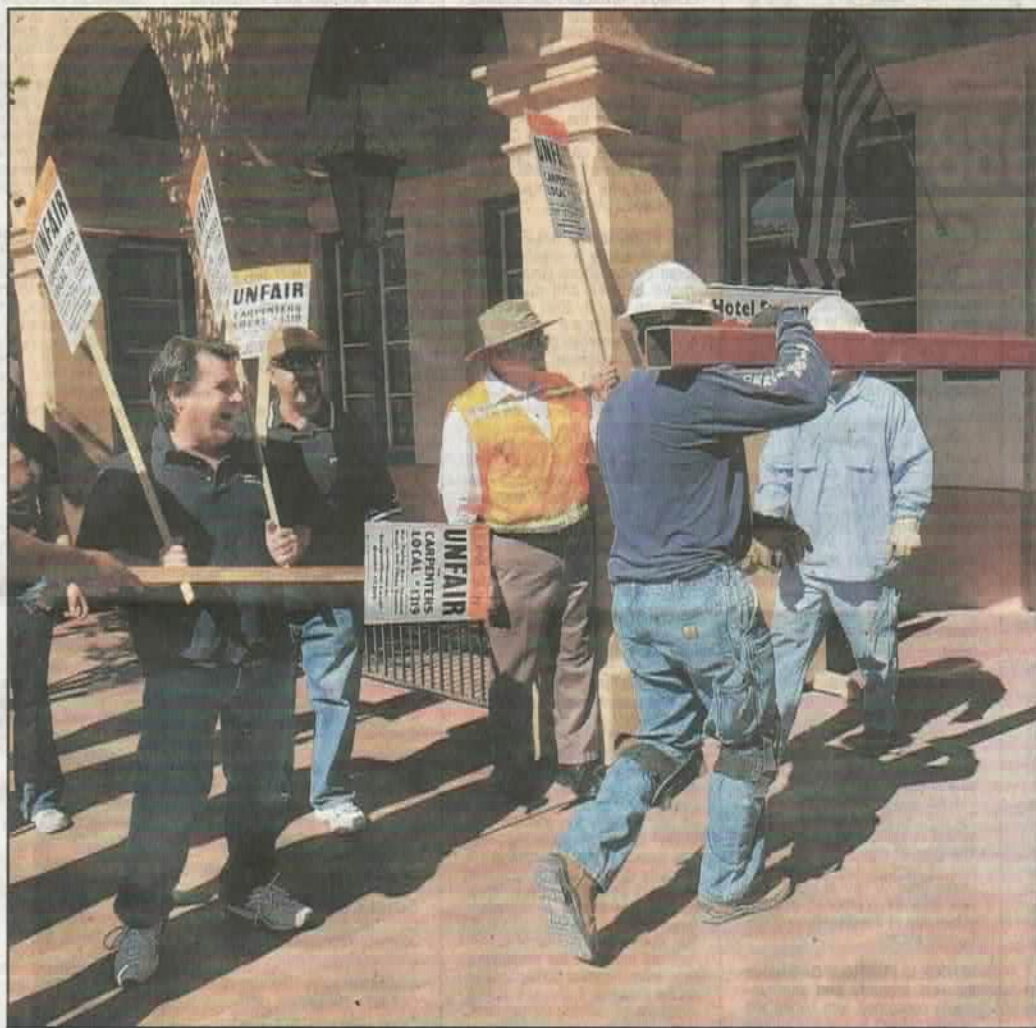
The supervisors said they'd never seen the head of a company counter their protests the way Karnas did on Thursday. "It's funny," one said. "He's paying guys through a bean blower up there (in the hotel) and he's down here doing this."

Construction continued normally within Hotel St. Francis, where Imer Madrid, a foreman on the job, was putting up stucco. He said he's worked for Lone Sun for more than eight years.

"We don't need no union," Madrid said. "I've got insurance, dental, 401(k). They have all kinds of stuff. They help a lot."

Madrid said in his time at Lone Sun he's seen employees leave for other jobs and join a union, only to return.

Chants of "There's rats in



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Employees and volunteers for Carpenters Local 1319 heckle non-union workers going in and out of Hotel St. Francis on Thursday, where they are doing renovation work with Lone Sun Builders of Albuquerque.

here! The two-legged kind!" and "Shame on Lone Sun!" didn't affect the work going on within the hotel, Madrid said.

"I don't even care what they do," he said. "I just come to do my job. That's it."

At least one nearby business owner did care, however.

"This is costing me money," said Brisa Barnes, who owns Atomic Grill near

Hotel St. Francis. "June business is usually good, but no one wants to sit outside and listen to this. ... I'm pro-union, but this is hurting my business."

Barnes said later that the protesters had lunch at Atomic Grill.

Karnas had previously told the *Journal* he didn't employ union labor because "I spent 21 years developing a benefits package I'm extremely proud of."

His close encounter with the other side has further soured him on the notion of unionizing.

"If I join a union, that's the kind of brothers I want?" he said. "This is what you get, guys like that as your brothers? I'd rather stand on my own, with integrity."

Union supervisors said they didn't know when or if they'll return to Hotel St. Francis.

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