

Carpenters union stakes out contracting sites

BY STEVE GINSBERG | SPECIAL TO NMBW

After 18 months of picketing and alleged harassment by the Southwest Regional Council of Carpenters Union, New Mexico's non-union contractors are fighting back.

Individually and through the Associated General Contractors of New Mexico Building Branch, they are countering the union's picket lines with their own protests and marketing campaign to discredit the union's charges of substandard wages and benefits.

The union's heavy offensive caught the industry off guard, but now the two sides have dug in and war has unofficially been declared. Confrontations between construction executives and pickets have been frequent. Police and security firms often have been called to job sites to banish the picketers for trespassing, say the contractors.

The picketers allege the contractors are not meeting community standards in wages and benefits while the contractors say the union is fabricating a grievance to pressure decision makers on building projects to hire its members. Caught in the cross hairs are retail businesses near the picket lines whose businesses have been impacted by them.

If the union can successfully organize and reverse its low representation in the



STAFF PHOTO

Pickers at an Albuquerque construction site carry placards claiming carpenters are paid substandard wages and benefits. Contractors say this type of activity is on the rise at their job sites.

state, it could have an escalating effect on construction prices, which have dropped to April 2007 levels because of the recession. Just 8 percent of the state's construction companies are unionized.

Union projects cost an estimated 33 percent more, say construction executives. These executives say they are already paying good wages and benefits and the union

is just using strong arm labor tactics to get a toehold in New Mexico.

The union has already won several political battles as pro-labor legislation has come out of the Round House. Gov. Bill Richardson has been a pro-labor governor and this has further put the contractors on the defensive and seemingly emboldened the union.

The Albuquerque-based Carpenters Union Local 1319's actions have come since New Mexico was transferred from the Mountain States Council to the jurisdiction of a council based in Southern California.

That council reportedly has hired pickets to show up on job sites ranging from churches and schools to new corporate buildings, such as Schott Solar at Mesa del Sol.

As union pickets swirled around the Hotel St. Francis in Santa Fe in early June, contractor Lone Sun Builders unfurled its own banner in a counter demonstration proclaiming the wages and benefits it offers.

"I have never paid cash, 94 percent of my employees receive health and dental, I pay 100 percent life insurance and I've raised the standards for my employees," defends Chet Karnas, president of Lone Star. "The protest was an attempt to get the general contractor, Gerald Martin, on the St. Francis project to fire us, but they have kept us on."

Karnas belonged to two unions earlier in his career and says he is pro-union but wants contractors who are already unionized to pressure the union to call off its "deplorable acts and semi-violent verbiage."

"This town is too small for this. The industry needs to do so much more to fight

UNION: *Pickets take off when photographed*

FROM PAGE 1

this," he said.

Carpenter's Union Vice President Hal Jensen, when asked about the union's New Mexico campaign, said he had no comment, but would issue a press release. None was issued by the Business Weekly's deadline. Jensen is based in Southern California and requests for comment from union officials here were deferred to him.

Strong arm labor tactics have been relatively unknown in New Mexico for decades. Many of the contractors targeted predict the tactics will backfire on the union.

Ralph Baldwin, CEO of Enterprise Builders, has felt the union's heat at job sites and instructs his foreman to call the police and take photos of the protestors.

"When we take the photos, their guys take off, but this has been a puzzlement to me. If they have to resort to coercion and threats, something is wrong with the union's business model. If they had a better plan, the union would have a waiting list to get in."

The carpenters union is building a new training center, which is currently under construction at Comanche and I-25. Some construction industry executives say the union is feeling squeezed by the recession and new technology, which has reduced the number of laborers at job sites.

They speculate that the union has targeted New Mexico because it is relatively stable compared to Las Vegas (Nev.), and continues to attract new companies that are building. Schott Solar's new headquarters was picketed in May. Schott was accused of not paying union scale wages.

"With the union antagonizing people who are bringing jobs here, how welcoming is that? Albuquerque is trying to attract companies across the U.S. and this doesn't help," says Mick Rich, whose construction firm, Michael S. Rich Contractors, works at the Schott site. "Their campaign will one day backfire on them. Historically, union and non-union workers have worked side-by-side. With these tactics, why would someone want to hire them?"

NEW MEXICO BUSINESS WEEKLY

Face of Business Rusty Schmit has met a lot of startup challenges in his career 7

SBS For this clothing company, a big move just made Sense 6

GAME JAM It's a NM video gamer's delight: new contest asks them to create a working video game in 48 hours. 5



VOL. 16 NO. 17



CHECK NEWMEXICO.BIZJOURNALS.COM — UPDATES ON BREAKING LOCAL BUSINESS NEWS ALL DAY LONG

JULY 3-9, 2009 \$1.75



UNION ACTION
Carpenters' picketers show up on more job sites 3