

To Protest Hiring of Nonunion Help, Union Hires Nonunion Pickets

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Jobless Recruits Get Minimum Wage ‘To March Around and Sound Off’

BY JENNIFER LEVITZ

WASHINGTON—Billy Raye, a 51-year-old unemployed bike courier, is looking for work.

Fortunately for him, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Council of Carpenters is seeking paid demonstrators to march and chant in its current picket line outside the McPherson Building, an office complex here where the council says work is being done with non-union labor.

“For a lot of our members, it’s really difficult to have them come out, either because of parking or something else,” explains Vincente Garcia, a union representative who is supervising the picketing.

So instead, the union hires unemployed people at the minimum wage—\$8.25 an hour—to

walk picket lines. Mr. Raye says he’s grateful for the work, even though he’s not sure why he’s doing it. “I could care less,” he says. “I am being paid to march around and sound off.”

Protest organizers and advocacy groups are reaping an unexpected benefit from continued high joblessness. With the national unemployment rate currently at 9.5%, an “endless supply” of the out-of-work, as well as retirees seeking extra income, are lining up to be paid demonstrators, says George Eisner, the union’s director of organization. Extra feet help the union staff about 150 picket lines in the District of Columbia and Baltimore each day.

Online postings recruit paid activists for everything from



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stopping offshore drilling to defending the Constitution.

In California, one group is offering to pay \$10 and up per hour to activists to hold signs in demonstrations against foam cups and plastic bags.

In Bellevue, Wash., the Faith and Freedom Network plans to hire activists for about \$10 an hour next month to promote statewide candidates with Judeo-Christian values for the fall elections, says Gary Randall, the group's president. Recruits will knock on doors and will be dispatched in large groups, hoping to draw media attention, he says.

Pierce Hutchings, a Chicago businessman and baseball fan, staffed a rally at Wrigley Field on the Cubs opening day in April by posting an ad on Craigslist offering \$25 of his own money to anyone willing to show up.

The cause? To protest plans to erect a big Toyota advertising sign in left field. The sign drew criticism from many Chicago residents and merchants who said it would impede their rooftop views of games. About 50 people showed up, put on yellow "No Sign @ Wrigley" T-shirts supplied by Mr. Hutchings, and urged passersby to call their local elected officials. The sign

was put up anyway.

While the money offers some relief for the unemployed, plugging a cause, even one that seems worthy, can be dispiriting.

"I told one guy today that I was fighting global poverty, and he looked me in the eye and said, 'I don't care,'" says Stephen Borlik, a new college graduate posted outside a D.C. subway stop recently as a \$13-per-hour street fundraiser for CARE, the antipoverty nonprofit organization in Atlanta.

Mr. Borlik moved here in May after graduating from Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant. He is living with his brother while looking for a job. "It can be extremely frustrating sending out résumé after résumé and getting no response. It almost makes you not want to do anything."

To keep his job at CARE, Mr. Borlik says, he must hit a weekly quota of new donors giving a minimum of \$20. A CARE spokeswoman says "team members" in the organization's "Face-to-Face" fund-raising program have a goal of two new donors per day.

In Atlanta, Timothy Baker, a 40-year-old unemployed warehouse worker, says his money-making strategy has been to walk picket lines for \$8.50 an



A protester pickets a building contractor outside the McPherson Building in Washington last month.

hour for the Southeastern Carpenters Regional Council. "It's something to do until you find something better."

While many big unions, including the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, frown on using nonmembers in picket lines, "we're not at all ashamed," says Jimmy Gibbs, director of special projects for the Southeastern Council. "We're

helping people who are in a difficult situation."

For four hours at the recent protest in D.C., about 50 picketers-for-hire—some smoking cigarettes, reading the paper, or on their phones; a few leaning on canes—walked in a circle outside the McPherson Building. The place is home to a Starbucks, a spa and offices. "Some days, the

beat is very good," said James Harff, chief executive officer of Global Communicators LLC, a public-relations concern, tapping one foot in his second floor office. Other days, he can hardly hear himself think.

"Low Pay! Go away!" and "That Rat Gotta Go!" the union stand-ins chanted as other workers banged cow-bells and beat on a trio of empty plastic buck-

ets. Eric Williams, a 70-year-old retiree who said he needs extra cash to buy groceries, wore a sign saying that Can-Am Contractors, a nonunion Maryland drywall and ceiling concern, "does not pay area standard wages & benefits."

The target of the campaign is the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, which is opening new classrooms on the second floor of the McPherson Building, and is having renovations done, including dry-walling by Can-Am.

"It is bizarre," says Lynne Baker, a school spokeswoman, about the union's hiring of nonunion picketers.

Inside, Juan Flores, Can-Am's foreman, said his nonunionized workers are paid fairly. Of the protesters, he said, "I don't blame them—they need the money, but they look like they are drunk or something."

The union's Mr. Garcia sees no conflict in a union that insists on union labor hiring nonunion people to protest the hiring of nonunion labor.

He says the pickets are not only about "union issues" but also about fair wages and benefits for American workers. By hiring the unemployed, "we are also giving back to the community a bit," he says.

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