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ABC MA Chairman's message: Construction in Mass. - One part politics, one part building

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Joe Camilo

Unfortunately, politics is often as much a part of what we do as actual building. And as all of us know, it's not easy being an open-shop contractor in Massachusetts.

This reality has certainly been on display of late. The Boston Globe published an editorial entitled "Project labor agreements are bad policy" on May 28, not long after Hampden County Superior Court judge Michael Callan prohibited a proposed PLA on a Springfield water treatment project from going forward. There was an eerie and uncomfortable unease when construction unions didn't respond to the editorial.

Now we know why. The unions took to the State House and succeeded in getting the House to amend at least two bills by adding language that bypasses limits set by Massachusetts' Supreme Judicial Court and gives municipalities and public agencies expanded authority to use union-only PLAs on public construction projects.

We have been working the Senate, House and the media to change the PLA language, and our government team was able to secure some qualifying language in the House, which is better than the blanket authorization the unions wanted. Our work has also produced a strong anti-PLA editorial in the Springfield Republican, the newspaper's second editorial on the topic this year.

During debate over the amended bills, it was disheartening to hear state representatives claiming that PLAs are needed to ensure that construction workers on public projects are paid fairly and treated well. Of course, public construction projects are already covered by state and federal prevailing wage laws that guarantee union-scale wages for all workers, regardless of labor affiliation. And open-shop companies are also subject to state certification and local prequalification requirements that apply to all contractors.

In its editorial, the Globe argued that "There really is no strong policy argument for imposing a PLA..." They mean "that those workers are paying taxes to help fund projects that PLAs would exclude them from working on."

Our challenge is to keep debunking myths and drive home the point that excluding the 81.8% of Massachusetts construction workers who choose not to join a union is unfair, reduces competition and drives up costs. You can count on the fact that we will continue to do exactly that.

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