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Editorial: Big decision for schools

Will board back unions or public interest?

Published 2:15 am PDT Thursday, April 21, 2005

Building-trade unions are putting heavy pressure on members of the

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Sacramento City Unified School District board to approve what's being called a project stabilization agreement. Such an agreement is more commonly known as a project labor agreement. But by any name, it is bad news for the public.

PLAs can differ in form and degree, but their purpose is always the same: to bar all but union contractors from working on public construction projects. For Sacramento City schools, such a policy would be an expensive disaster.



The practical effect of PLAs is to reduce competition and drive up costs. Under a PLA, construction contracts would no longer go to the lowest competent bidder for a school project, but to the lowest bidder with a work force that agrees to either pay union dues or work under union-like conditions. Union proponents of PLAs say they could guarantee labor peace, that there would be no strikes for the life of the agreement. That sounds like a threat, which is troubling enough. Unfortunately, experience shows the unions can't even deliver on the promise. The San Francisco International Airport expansion built under a PLA was hit with two strikes; so was a project at the Port of Oakland, also built under a PLA.

Nor is there any proof that a PLA actually benefits workers. Close to 85 percent of construction workers in the state are nonunion. When working on public construction projects, all workers receive the prevailing wage. Under California law, the prevailing wage is not the weighted average as it is in most states but the most frequently occurring wage, which is always the union wage.

So workers employed rebuilding Sacramento City schools receive union wages now. If a PLA is put in place, they would have to be assigned out of a union hall, work under union work rules and make contributions to a union pension fund even if they already pay into a retirement fund with their nonunion employers, as many construction workers do.

Perhaps most important, a PLA also would break faith with the voters. After several school bond failures in a row, Sacramento voters twice agreed to tax themselves to build new schools and rehabilitate old ones. Bond measures approved in 1999 and 2002 raised close to \$400 million in local property taxes. Bond proponents promised to give taxpayers the best value for their buck. Reducing competition, as PLA agreements inevitably do, hardly works to lower costs.

The school board is poised to vote on a resolution approving use of a project stabilization agreement that has not even been drafted yet. Sacramento City

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Superintendent Magdalena Mejia has made no recommendation on the proposal. Her silence speaks volumes.

This vote will be a test for the new Sacramento City school board majority. All received strong union support. If this proposal goes forward and the board votes for the unions' interests rather than for what's in the best interest of the school district and the kids, the voters will get the message.

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