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PLA is bad news for local workers

University of California regents should reject project labor agreement for UC Merced construction

The University of California Board of Regents is getting ready to make an important decision regarding construction of the University of California, Merced. The board will decide whether to sign off on a project labor agreement, otherwise known as a PLA, that is being negotiated by the university and trade unions.

Nobody's releasing specifics of how the negotiations are going, but regardless, we urge the regents to vote against a PLA, whatever its terms.

The regents need to stick with tried and true procedures for contracting out construction, and that means open bidding by all qualified contractors, without secretly negotiated labor agreements that drive up wage costs, feather union nests and leave good local workers out in the cold.

You see, if the regents approve a PLA, it will have the effect of creating a barrier for local workers and contractors, and that will be nothing less than a poke in the eye for the people of Merced and the rest of the Central Valley.

In plain talk, the PLA issue is a union vs. nonunion issue, with the big, well-financed, well-connected unions from outside the Valley using a PLA to elbow local nonunion people out of the UC Merced project. And that explains all of the union hammering for a PLA. (Remember that the UC Merced project isn't exactly small change. There'll be more than \$150 million worth of work out at the campus golf course site starting in May - and that's just the beginning. Little wonder, then, that unions from all over the state are salivating.)

The nonunion folks are going toe-to-toe with their union cousins, though, and when all is said and done, the nonunion folks are more credible. Make that a lot more credible. In fact, we're even embarrassed for the unions, because they've had to drag out smoke and mirrors in an attempt to make their case.

For example, their slick packet of information includes something called "PROJECT LABOR AGREEMENTS: An Exploratory Study," written by Daniel Rounds, who is identified as a research associate at the Institute for Labor and Employment at UCLA.

His study focused on three construction projects (two were power plants) that had PLAs, and he addressed the pros and cons of project labor agreements. After interviewing project owners and managers, Rounds concluded



The opinion of the Merced Sun-Star

that their comments supported PLA proponents.

Duh. He talked to people who agreed to

PLAs in the first place, and so when he talked to them, they said they like PLAs. Of course! The study's findings offer scant proof that PLAs are the construction industry's equivalent of motherhood and apple pie.

One more thing, while we're on the subject of the study. Rounds didn't note the symbiotic relationship between environmental groups and the trade unions when it comes to power plant construction. Here's the deal, according to The Wall Street Journal: A utility company comes along and wants to build a new power plant. But during the permitting process, the utility is handed a choice. Either agree to a PLA or be hauled into court for allegedly violating the Endangered Species Act. Cute.

But getting back to UC Merced...

The University of California regents had planned to decide on a PLA during their meeting in Los Angeles today or tomorrow, but now, they've decided to postpone the vote. That probably means the board is nearly evenly split.

And so about 50 PLA opponents plan to show up today to express their concerns.

Clayton Smith, a branch manager of the Associated Builders and Contractors, Golden Gate Chapter, said, "We want to demonstrate our presence there Wednesday regardless and make sure that they know where we stand and the fact that there is a population out here that would be left out" with the PLA agreement.

Smith says the regents' decision "will have an impact on every surrounding city and county throughout the Central Valley because if they (agreement backers) get a project labor agreement here at UC Merced, that is their foot in the door to the rest of the Central Valley, and their ultimate goal is to try to make it policy for the entire state."

There is no good reason for the regents to accept a PLA, and so we hope the unions can't flex enough muscle or call in enough markers to win the day.

We don't mean for this to be an indictment of all labor union actions, but if the unions win in this upcoming regents vote, Merced County and the rest of the Valley will definitely lose, big time.