

Labor Management Viewpoints: Unfair competition will destroy industry

February 9, 2005

Businesses today are constantly seeking avenues to reduce their cost of staying in business. In our industry, that means cost of materials and labor, including benefit costs and mandated taxes and insurance, general operation overhead costs and net profit after taxes to reinvest and keep the business going. Pretty fundamental.

Our industry value system demands productivity, ingenuity, continuing education, safety training and integrity in order to survive.

President Bush recently talked about allowing alien workers into our country and giving amnesty to illegal workers already here to take the jobs that Americans choose not to perform. Our system for a legal, orderly entry is the proper method for addressing this issue.

Our nation has a history of immigrants from other nations across the globe becoming citizens and thus providing the fuel for our development and past successes as a country. Many of these people ultimately realize their part of the American Dream of a better life for their families through entrepreneurial ventures or by obtaining a skilled craft.

This was and is possible through the multiple opportunities that our free nation affords all of its citizens. This is historical fact.

I am certain there are many jobs in our country that Americans have truly educated and trained themselves beyond, and opportunity beckons for others to fill this need. The laws of our land ensure fairness for these workers. It seems in many cases as though these workers truly are appreciative of the chance to come to the United States for a better life.

In our construction businesses, there is no shortage of American workers willing to do the work. We are a vibrant industry that prides itself on our values. Our entire industry is constantly improving itself and provides for stable employment during normal business cycles for our workers. Our work force has labored hard to earn the living necessary to provide for families and pay the taxes required to ensure a solid infrastructure in order to maintain a high quality of life for this generation and future ones.

Circumventing integrity

The cavalier manner of open migration of workers allows for individuals within our industry to circumvent the integrity of what we have worked hard to achieve, and this is wrong. It allows for and encourages some employers to seek out and hire people willing to do any construction job for less compensation than the marketplace has established as the norm. This equates to a quick race to the bottom where we will have workers with less training and jobs of less quality. Long term, we will likely see higher costs and lose the infrastructure that allows for continuation of our crafts to future generations.

When the system in place allows and encourages competition to recruit and hire a work force hungry for opportunity without a level playing field on training, safety, benefits, including workers comp, unemployment, health insurance, disability, reasonable old-age security and very little interest in the community within which they work, the scales will tip and that system will crash.

America's capitalism is the source of its economic strength, and we will always seek a better method to perform any task. Competition is healthy for America.

However, unfair competition will destroy us.

As an industry we must be keenly aware of that which has made us successful. Major components of that success are our high-achievement work force and the entrepreneurial drive of our business owners.

We must all strive to keep our standards high in order to deliver the highest value to our customers.

John Topp is the executive director of the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin Inc. and its Building Advantage campaign.