

Labor Management Viewpoints: Union construction – an American partnership

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Twenty years ago in Rancho Mirage, Calif., a group of nonunion contractors presented a dismal report at the Construction Users Roundtable Annual Meeting. Culprits like “retirement,” “licensing” and “unattractive jobs” were blamed for a loss of skilled workers. In November 2004, a similar alarm was sounded by the Associated Builders and Contractors and some of its affiliate partners. This time, words like “recruit,” “retain,” “good jobs with good wages” and even “cents-per-man-hour support” were used. Obviously, not much had changed for nonunion workers over the years. That’s why unions are so important. Unions embrace these concepts, and always have. Recruiting and retention have never been a problem, earning a good wage for a full day’s work is the norm, and training funds have been in place for many, many years. These are not new concepts if you’re in the union construction industry.

Perhaps not everyone is familiar with the union construction industry’s commitment to quality work, safety, education, fair pay and, in short, the American Way of life: teamwork between unions, contractors and customers, mandatory safety and education programs, and good wages for skilled labor. I speak from my experience as a steamfitter-turned-training coordinator; however, I believe that my story is no different than any other union member’s experience.

Let’s start with our contractors in this partnership. They bid work at a slightly higher rate due to their belief in and support of the American Way. They make a commitment to field-train each apprentice in all skills needed to be a successful journey-level worker at the end of five years. They also invest in the formal training aspects of our industry by paying each apprentice the current wage and benefits for their day-school training. And let’s not forget their willingness to contribute to national training funds as well. On the surface, these do not seem like sound business decisions. It increases their overhead and forces them to bid jobs at higher rate.

However, their actions prove an understanding of and commitment to the future of this industry. They realize the value of the future for their company, the industry and even our country, and they have decided to invest in it by supporting union-sponsored programs. They invest in education and skills to ensure a knowledgeable work force for their companies. They pay fair wages and good benefits for those skills, which increases work-force retention and allows families to live comfortably in the United States and support our economy.

How customers contribute

Let’s take a look at how our customers contribute to the American Way. If they did not believe in the benefits of union construction, they would not commit to our contractors. Their only decision would be based on the lowest bid. This, again, shows support in the future of the industry. Many of our customers understand the benefit of safety, skills and knowledge, especially in the trades. As a matter of fact, these same customers employ many of our journey-level workers at their facilities. Their investment up front in granting work to our contractors results in a skilled work force available to complete quality work safely, timely and efficiently while providing the training needed for apprentices. This ensures an educated and skilled work force for their future needs.

Let’s not forget the union members in this partnership. We, too, make sacrifices up front so we can benefit in the future. We truly believe in education. Our apprenticeship programs are constantly re-evaluated and updated to keep us on the technological edge. Currently, our apprentices receive about 1,000 hours of formal classroom instruction. These mandated hours coupled with 8,750 hours of field experience prove we believe training is the key to success. We train others to take our jobs in the future. We support our beliefs by voluntarily contributing \$.46/hour to our training fund. These monies are used to support the nonpaid-related education that takes place in our training facilities, both for apprentices and journey-level workers. Education is a never-ending benefit for all members. This year, our school offered more than 60 courses to the members at our two training facilities in Milwaukee and Madison. How’s that for investing in the future?

So there you have it. The partnership between union, contractor and owner is already in place and has been for a long time. Education, hard work, a living wage and fair benefits is embraced by all of us who partner for this future. We do not have a skilled labor shortage. We recruit and retain based on the American Way of life. You really do get what you pay for.

Patricia Daniels is coordinator of the Milwaukee Area Steamfitters Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee.