

The Washington Post

Outsourcing the Picket Line

Advertisement

Carpenters Union Hires Homeless to Stage Protests

By Keith L. Alexander
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Tuesday, July 24, 2007

The picketers marching in a circle in front of a downtown Washington office building chanting about low wages do not seem fully focused on their message.

Many have arrived with large suitcases or bags holding their belongings, which they keep in sight. Several are smoking cigarettes. One works a crossword puzzle. Another bangs a tambourine, while several drum on large white buckets. Some of the men walking the line call out to passing women, "Hey, baby." A few picketers gyrate and dance while chanting: "What do we want? Fair wages. When do we want them? Now."

Although their placards identify the picketers as being with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Council of Carpenters, they are not union members.

They're hired feet, or, as the union calls them, temporary workers, paid \$8 an hour to picket. Many were recruited from homeless shelters or transitional houses. Several have recently been released from prison. Others are between jobs.

"It's about the cash," said Tina Shaw, 44, who lives in a House of Ruth women's shelter and has walked the line at various sites. "We're against low wages, but I'm here for the cash."

Carpenters locals across the country are outsourcing their picket lines, hiring the homeless, students, retirees and day laborers to get their message across. Larry Hujo, a spokesman for the Indiana-Kentucky Regional Council of Carpenters, calls it a "shift in the paradigm" of picketing.

Political groups also are tapping into local homeless shelters for temps.

One resident of the Community for Creative Non-Violence shelter earns \$30 a day holding a sign outside a Metro stop protesting nuclear war. In 2004, residents of at least 10 shelters were paid to collect signatures on petitions in favor of legalized gambling. Residents call this type of work "lobbying."

The carpenters union is one of the most active picketers in the District, routinely staging as many as eight picket lines a day at buildings where construction or renovation work is being done without union labor.

Supporters of the practice consider it a creative tactic in an era of declining union membership and clout. But critics say the reliance on nonunion members -- who are paid \$1 above minimum wage and receive no benefits -- diminishes the impact and undercuts a principle established over decades of union struggles.

"If I was a member of the general public, and I asked someone picketing why they were there, and they said they don't work for the union and they were just hired to stand there, that wouldn't create a very positive impression on me, nor would it create a very sympathetic position," said Wayne Ranick, spokesman for the United

Steelworkers of America.

The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, the Mid-Atlantic local's parent, is one of seven unions in Change to Win, a group formed in 2005 after a split from the AFL-CIO. One reason the carpenters union left was because it favored more aggressive organizing.

The United Brotherhood of Carpenters is the only union that routinely hires homeless people for its picket lines, union leaders and labor scholars say. It targets locations where work such as carpentry and drywall and floor installation is done without union labor. In a June newsletter on the union's Web site, the union's president and chief executive, Bill Halbert, referred to the pickets as "area standards campaigns."

Halbert did not respond to phone calls and messages left at the union's office in Forestville. George Eisner, the local's lead organizer in Baltimore, did not keep an appointment for a scheduled phone interview and did not answer several messages.

Hujo said the Indiana-Kentucky council has been hiring homeless people, retirees and college students as picketers for about two years.

Carpenters unions in Indianapolis, Atlanta, Baltimore, Miami, San Diego and Columbus, Ohio, also hire picketers, including the homeless, largely because the union members are busy working and aren't able to leave job sites, he said.

"People say it's not normal," Hujo said. "But this is a quality-of-life issue. This is not a union versus nonunion issue."

Other unions have not embraced the idea of hired feet, but few openly criticize the carpenters.

Joslyn Williams, president of the Metropolitan Washington AFL-CIO, differentiated between picketers calling for a boycott or a strike and picket lines such as the ones the carpenters have. "It's an informational picket, so it's a legitimate tool," he said.

John Boardman, executive secretary treasurer of UNITE HERE local 25 in Washington, said the issue of who the picketers are is less important than why they're there. "Let's focus on the message -- that there are people in this building that are working for substandard wages and benefits," he said.

In Washington, the carpenters union targets a different building almost daily.

At the protest site, union organizers ask for identification and a Social Security card from those who want to picket. The picketers are divided into groups of about 30, and some are sent on to other sites. They are often accompanied by an eight-foot-tall inflatable rat brought in by pickup.

On a recent Thursday morning, one group was sent to 1100 13th St. NW, another group to the corner of 21st and M streets. Typically, two or three union members are on hand to oversee each group. Armed with clipboards, they check off the names of picketers when they arrive and leave to ensure that they work their full two to four hours.

One day, a group picketed from 9 to 11 a.m. in the 600 block of Indiana Avenue NW. After an hour lunch break, the picketers headed to the 900 block of Capitol Street NW from noon to 2 p.m.

Their placards have the name of the targeted firm taped at the top; when the picketers move on to another company, the name is changed.

Capitol Drywall was the name on one placard two weeks ago. The carpenters' picketers were outside an office building on New Hampshire Avenue NW, where the company's employees were erecting drywall.

Mark Sokoloff, Capitol's vice president of operations, said his company is not unionized but offers its employees fair and competitive wages, as well as benefits.

"It's something that we would like to see disappear and go away," he said of the picket lines that appear frequently at job sites. "But if it won't, it's something that we will deal with."

The picketers get mixed reactions from passersby. Some drivers honk to show support. But many who work in nearby buildings and must listen to the picketers' chants for several hours are irritated.

Several picketers said they have had water thrown on them from upper floors in office buildings. That only encourages picketers to get louder, said one picketer who asked that his name not be published.

D.C. police Cmdr. Patrick Burke, who oversees the homeland security and special operations division, said the picketers have never broken any laws. If police receive noise complaints, officers will ask them to quiet down, he said, and they always comply.

"They have a First Amendment right to engage in free speech and assembly," he said. "We don't want to discourage people from doing so. But they just have to do so within reason."

Some activists for the homeless are unhappy with the practice of paid picketing. They say it amounts to using people down on their luck rather than giving them a hand up. Ingrid Reed, who coordinates job placement and housing at the Community for Creative Non-Violence shelter, said the money the unions pay picketers would be better spent on training or apprentice programs that teach skills.

"These jobs won't pay the rent," Reed said. "If they're out there every day Monday through Friday, when are they looking for a job?"

Reed said many residents of the shelter are hired to demonstrate at corners throughout the city.

"On any given day, if you have 20 protesters out there somewhere, 15 of them live here," she said.

Several picketers said they see the time spent on the line as one of the few legal ways they are able to earn money.

William R. Strange, 41, said he started working as a for-hire picket two years ago when he lived in a homeless shelter on New York Avenue. He is now paid \$12 an hour because he plays the buckets during the demonstrations.

A few months ago, after a day's picketing across from the National Geographic Society at 17th and M streets NW, Strange went inside and filled out a job application. He now loads trucks for National Geographic's warehouse at night. He still pickets during the day.

Strange also recently moved into his own one-bedroom apartment near the Brookland Metro station.

"Every day I turn that key to my apartment, I feel great. I owe that to the picketing," he said. "And it keeps me out of trouble."

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