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The Washington Connection

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The Truth About Project Labor Agreements

The subject of project labor agreements (PLAs) is not new to many of our members and officers. PLAs have been in use throughout the country, dating as far back as 1937. Notable projects covered by a PLA include the Grand Coulee Dam, Kennedy Space Center, Disney World and the Trans Alaska pipeline. In fact, most of our roofers, at some point in their careers, have worked on a job that was under a project labor agreement. Because of the presidential order that overturned the ban of PLAs on public projects, we will be hearing much more about PLAs in the near future.

By definition, a PLA is a pre-hire collective bargaining agreement between the local building trades council and contractors or owners. It sets out basic terms and working conditions of all tradesmen employed on a particular project. It is limited by the scope of work defined in the agreement and normally expires when the project is completed. A PLA dictates the same basic terms and working conditions as a local collective bargaining agreement: Scope of work, union recognition, work stoppages and lockouts, working hours and overtime, shift pay, jurisdictional disputes, grievances and subcontracting might all be addressed. A PLA may vary slightly or significantly from your local collective bargaining agreement in terms of working conditions and other language; however, employees' wages and benefits are typically the same under a PLA as in their local agreement.

The main benefit of a PLA is that it ensures the project will be completed in an efficient, cost effective and timely manner, which is the key selling point to contractors and owners. Furthermore, it guarantees completion of a project without work stoppages. Many contractors view it as a "risk management tool" that gives them protection against work stoppages and strikes. Contractors might also benefit from the more-flexible assignments and scheduling than would exist under a local agreement, as well as the readily available skilled employees routed through the referral systems stipulated in an agreement. In turn, PLAs assure that the project will be all-union (private-project PLA), or that the area local union wages, benefits and working conditions will be implemented on the project (public-project PLA).

PLAs are negotiated by local building trades councils and their affiliated locals. The terms and conditions of a PLA vary across the country, with market conditions, union density, skilled-worker availability and legislative capability all factors in determining a council's ability to negotiate an equitable

PLA. A common misconception is that PLAs are negotiated on a national level. The Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO has a mandatory approval process that requires the following criteria be met:

1. Clearly defined scope
2. Dispute and grievance resolution procedures
3. Resolution of jurisdictional disputes
4. Subcontracting language
5. Helmets to Hardhats language

All other terms and conditions are determined and negotiated on a local level. It is therefore crucial that our local unions participate in the negotiations to protect the work of our union and our members' interest.

As cost-effective and efficient as they are, PLAs are not supported across the board. Critics of PLAs claim that they create cost overruns, discriminate against minorities and unfairly exclude non-union contractors from projects. These allegations are entirely unsubstantiated. Studies have shown that PLAs do not add costs to projects. They do provide career opportunities that might not have existed before for minorities. And it is a misconception that PLAs exclude non-union contractors from participating; any contractor—union or non-union—is eligible to bid on a project under a PLA.

PLAs have historically proven to be an effective tool in increasing market share, especially in low-union-density regions. They have provided an immeasurable amount of man-hours for the union construction industry, including the members of our union. With that success in mind, our International Union strongly supports and encourages the use of PLAs to provide gainful employment to our members.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Iowans Hope for PLAs on Flood Projects

Outside the facility where Master Builders was holding a meeting, members of Local 182, Cedar Rapids, IA, and their union brothers and sisters rallied in support of PLAs on FEMA-related flood restoration projects. The rally was a combined effort of the Cedar Rapids/Iowa City Building Trades.



At a rally in Cedar Rapids, IA, Local 182 retired business manager Bob Rowe shows his support of PLAs on upcoming county flood projects.

