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AGC Holds First Regional Meeting with Carpenters and Operating Engineers

June 5, 2009

The first AGC-NCAII regional meeting took place at the Carpenters training facility in Philadelphia, PA, on May 28. Members and staff from the Philadelphia Builders Chapter, Contractors Association of Eastern Pennsylvania, and AGC of New Jersey attended, along with the general presidents and regional business managers of the Carpenters and Operating Engineers unions, AGC Union Contractors Committee Staff Associate Denise Gold, and NCAII Executive Vice President Ray Poupore. The NCAII - an abbreviation of National Construction Alliance II - is a partnership of the Carpenters and Operating Engineers international unions. The "II" was added after the Laborers dropped out of the alliance last year.

The regional meetings are intended to provide AGC chapters with an opportunity to communicate union contractors' local and regional concerns directly to the union leaders and to engage in a dialogue to solve problems together. "The purpose is for us to find out what we can do to help make your companies more successful," Poupore stated in opening comments. Operating Engineers General President Vince Giblin added, "We need to be real partners, not partners of convenience just when we need to be." The Operating Engineers are changing their approach from "strong arm tactics" to helping signatory contractors be more competitive, according to Giblin. Echoed Carpenters General President Doug McCarron, "If you're successful, we're successful....We need to come to you to see what you need to get the work."

Contractors raised a number of concerns, such as frustration with local union business agents that give better concessions to nonunion general contractors who subcontract to union subcontractors than they give to union general contractors, and the resulting loss of jobs for owners aware of the practice, the excessive cost of using union specialty contractors and repercussions of subcontracting to nonunion specialty contractors, loss of jobs due to the Carpenters' poor image related to jurisdictional disputes, and problems with project labor agreements.

"We're union contractors because we want to be union contractors," explained David Panichi, Philadelphia Builders' Chapter Chairman of the Board, "but it's very difficult today to sell our product to the owners...You're going to lose us through this process." Giblin responded by relating his efforts to bring about a culture change in his organization and to get rid of poor local leaders, including his recent take-over of a New Jersey local. "We've looked the other way too long in this organization," he said. Some local leaders have "been rocked to sleep." They had it "too good" for a long time and are now facing rough times for the first time. "All they've ever done is beat you guys up with a billy club. That's got to stop," he said, adding that cleaning up the organization is a slow process. "We're making progress, but it takes time."

McCarron suggested that labor and management could tackle mutual challenges together in the same manner accomplished with safety years ago. Labor and management worked together with owners 25-30 years ago to fix the safety problem, and "we can change this too, if we put our collective minds together," he said. "We had a goal and stuck to it..." We need to have a vision and work toward it, he continued, with or without the specialty trades.

Both Giblin and McCarron expressed growing respect for Mark Ayers, the president of the AFL-CIO's Building and Construction Trades Department, but continued disdain for the building trades in general. Ayers is a "good guy" and means well, they said, but many of the general presidents in the Department are too concerned about ceremony and have lost their way.

Both general presidents also expressed interest in hearing about problems directly from contractors. At times in the meeting, the general presidents seemed to be blaming the contractors for failing to bring problems to their attention. Giblin stated that he would promptly return any contractor's phone call; and, when one highway contractor brought up problems with featherbedding, Giblin told him to call him about such problems in the future and he would look into it.

The next AGC-NCAII meeting is scheduled for July 13 in Chicago, IL.

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