

Union-only state policy is unfair

Dianne Williamson

If I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning. In the evening, I'd use it to knock some sense into a governor bent on depriving me of a living.

Once again, politics and special interests are trumping practicality and fairness when it comes to "competitive bidding," an oxymoron in a state that continues to discriminate against nonunion workers.

Last month, Gov. Deval L. Patrick courted the unionized building trades by reiterating his support of project labor agreements. Speaking to the annual convention of the Massachusetts Building Trades Council, he said his administration wants a PLA for a new \$150 million science center at UMass-Boston. He's also considering one for an academic building at UMass-Amherst, a new Lowell courthouse and a library project at Salem State College.

The use of PLAs amounts to a union-only construction policy, because PLAs require that all hiring for projects be done through union halls and that all workers pay union dues and adhere to union work rules.

Guess who has the upper hand in that scenario? And guess who's left holding the hammer?

"It's just another thumb in the eye of hardworking taxpayers who choose not to belong to special interest groups," said Ronald N. Cogliano, executive director of the Merit Construction Alliance, an association of open-shop contractors. "I think the governor ought to let me take him around to nonunion folks and explain to them why they're not good enough for the job."

I've written enough about this travesty to know the union arguments by heart: Use of a PLA ensures that workers are paid the prevailing wage, are well trained, and that they don't go on strike. It ensures that companies are local. Never mind that Mr. Cogliano rightly refers to these claims as red herrings, as they could be accomplished through other means and serve to distract people from the real problem with PLAs: They discriminate against people who chose not to join a union.

"It's not on every project," said Joanne F. Goldstein, state secretary of Labor and Workforce Development, as though limited use justifies unfairness. "PLAs bring to projects certain things you're not guaranteed to have otherwise."

Locally, open-shop contractors such as Fran Madigan and James J. Grasseschi have

argued eloquently for the rights of nonunion workers burdened by PLAs in Worcester.

“I’m not here to bash the unions, but why can’t they compete on a level playing field?” Mr. Grasseschi once asked. Good question, especially when the use of PLAs tends to drive up the cost of taxpayer-funded projects by limiting the bids.

But the answer is obvious — trade unions have deep pockets. A “ cursory review” by the Merit Construction Alliance shows that, since 2005, the building and trade unions have donated \$74,000 to Patrick’s campaign and \$145,000 to the Massachusetts Democratic Committee, Mr. Cogliano said.

“It’s an election year and he’s trying to curry favor with the unions,” he said. “He’s engaging in a ‘pay to play’ system ... My membership is incensed. They’re asked to pay more and more, and they’re being denied an equal opportunity by this governor.”

The union and open-shop sides differ on the strength of their numbers. Mr. Cogliano says close to 80 percent of the construction force is nonunion, while the pro-union faction says 55 percent of the force is unionized. Regardless, it doesn’t make sense to engage in what’s been dubbed “economic apartheid” by the mayor of Philadelphia. The merit shops don’t expect special favors — why should the unions?

Mr. Cogliano has written a three-page letter to the governor, saying that his members deserve the opportunity to bid and work on public projects funded with their tax dollars.

“You would lock them out simply because they make a free and conscious decision not to join a labor union,” he wrote. “With all due respect, this policy is wrong and it appears to be nothing less than political favoritism at the expense of beleaguered taxpayers.”

He’s right, and here’s one beleaguered taxpayer asking our leaders to put a nail in the coffin of union entitlement, however it’s disguised.