

POLICY BRIEF

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Clueless in Pittsburgh

A recent resolution passed by City Council once again demonstrates the fealty shown by Pittsburgh's elected officials to organized labor. A fealty that is rightly owed to taxpayers and citizens.

Addressing the ongoing Teamster strike against parking lot operators, the resolution supports the efforts of the workers while implying that operators have a "secondary agenda" and are engaging in "union busting". Ironically, these accusations even included the Pittsburgh Public Parking Authority, a City-created entity whose Board of Directors are appointed by the Mayor.

This latest resolution, which passed unanimously, came on the heels of an appearance of workers and union officials in Council chambers. There was a clear quid pro quo: newspaper reports noted that union support in the future would depend on passage of the resolution.

This was not the first--and certainly won't be the last--time that Council has engaged in symbolism politics in support of union labor. Two years ago, a non-binding resolution was passed in response to union concerns that developers of the South Side Works were using non-union workers on a project (*see Policy Brief Volume 3, Number 11*). Worse still, the resolution bought into union accusations that the workers were illegal immigrants, even though this was not clear. But the message was clear: non-union labor would not be welcome in Pittsburgh.

At the time, economic development officials were engaged in an all-out effort to craft a "new image" for Pittsburgh. That effort has apparently been shelved, Council members have come and gone, but the obsequious obeisance to union labor remains.

Consider some of the resolution's language:

"As Council watches the deliberations between the operators of the parking facilities, both private and the taxpayers' Pittsburgh Parking Authority, it has become clear that the process has broken down and has little chance of success. Past experience has shown that a catastrophic failure such as this occurs when one side or the other has allowed a secondary agenda to circumvent the necessity to find a middle ground". What, exactly, is the secondary agenda? That employers want workers to perform other tasks when they are not busy with auto-related duties to achieve savings since the City's 50 percent parking tax has cut into their business and lowered their earnings? One must wonder why earning a profit in Pittsburgh is considered a secondary agenda. Perhaps the Council should ask the Council president to spell out the agenda of the Parking Authority since he serves on their board of directors.

Council might also consider the harm it does to the City's businesses and the City when it levies exorbitant taxes. This would be preferable to acting in an injurious way and then hoping that some miracle will save them from the inevitable negative consequences.

"[Council] must determine which party is acting inappropriately and publicly demand that they return to good faith bargaining". It should come as no surprise that Council found the employers to be the offending party.

"[Employer] proposals...appear to be designed to gut the labor agreement, force a work stoppage, break the Union, and produce substandard wages" by holding steadfast to their position. Consider that early this week, after the resolution was passed, the Teamsters rejected a proposal that would have given them a 10 cent per hour increase over the original contract offer, as well as decrease the amount they would have to pay toward health care coverage. That does not sound like an attempt by operators to carry out what Council sees as a union busting effort.

Consider too that current wages are in the range of \$8 to \$12.70 per hour and that replacement workers, presumably people who don't mind working at those rates, have already been hired. Obviously, the market can work despite the best efforts of City Council to pretend it doesn't exist.

Finally this gem; *"Nationally televised sporting events will convey and support the incorrect assumption that workers and employers cannot peacefully settle their differences"*. What utter, self-absorbed foolishness. Pittsburgh's Council openly supports unions against their employers at every opportunity, giving unions more reason not to bargain in good faith, and then it is worried about the City's labor-management image. Maybe Council should consider being more even-handed in these matters or, better yet, stay out of them altogether. Certainly, Council's unfailing favoritism toward unions is detrimental to the City's ability to attract private sector employers.

The resolution confirms what was already known: union labor holds the cards in Pittsburgh politics. Construction jobs must be union labor. Parking lot operators can't negotiate or hold firm without being accused of trying to create low-paying jobs. And any attempts at public sector reform, whether downsizing the fire department, privatizing garbage collection or fleet management, are resisted and the taxpayers pay the bill. Until they have had enough and head for the exits.

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