



Dan Walters: California labor union feud lands on Brown's desk

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Published: Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2013 - 9:41 pm
Last Modified: Wednesday, Oct. 9, 2013 - 7:46 am

It's certainly not unusual for conflicts between business and labor to be played out in the Capitol.

It is, however, very unusual for conflicts between two [labor unions](#) to reach the Capitol. And one such duel now presents Gov. Jerry Brown with a dilemma.

The state's building trades unions – carpenters, plumbers, electricians, etc. – sponsored legislation that would require construction work on [oil refineries](#) to be done by a “skilled and trained workforce.”

Coming in the wake of a disastrous fire at Chevron's Richmond refinery, that requirement doesn't sound unreasonable from the standpoint of public safety. Public safety, in fact, is the official rationale for Senate Bill 54 from its author, Sen. Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, and its sponsors.

But, as with all such bills, the devil is in the details, and in this case, the definition of a “skilled and trained workforce” involves very detailed specifications of apprenticeship programs. And those specifications, not surprisingly, exactly mirror the programs operated by State Building and Construction Trades Council's member unions.

The effect of the legislation, which gained heavy support from the Legislature's majority Democrats, apparently would be to exclude members of the United Steelworkers Union, which represents 5,000 refinery workers in the state. The USW has, therefore, mounted a campaign to persuade Brown to veto the bill.

“Instead of raising the bar for training,” United Steelworkers says in a letter to Brown, “SB54 lowers it by excluding our current trained and experienced workforce.”

The union calls it “a jurisdictional dispute” that should be resolved “within the house of labor,” rather than “legislation that will devastate the lives of our members and their families.”

Unions aren't the only ones divided by the bill. Contractors who employ building trades union members support it because it would, in effect, compel Chevron and other refineries to hire them to do construction work. But other contractors, along with the [oil industry](#) and other business groups, oppose it.

The state's largest array of refineries is to be found along [San Francisco Bay](#) and its estuaries in [Contra Costa County](#), so the bill has received special attention in that area.

The Contra Costa Times newspaper editorialized that “the Legislature has recklessly voted to place the entire [Bay Area](#) at risk” with the bill because it would undermine Contra Costa County's industrial safety ordinance.

We'd all like to think that the Legislature acts only after objectively seeing a problem, weighing pro and con arguments and informing itself of the facts.

SB54 is, unfortunately, further proof that most lawmakers' votes are driven only by which special interest groups support and oppose a bill.

Like many legislative acts, it's a solution in search of a problem.

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