

Lead Report

Building Trades

Building Trades Unions Looking to Gain More Support From Republican Party

Members of North America's Building Trades Unions will need to avoid engaging primarily Democratic legislators and seek out more political relationships with Republicans in office to remain relevant amid a changing political landscape, NABTU President Sean McGarvey said April 20.

In his address to union members at NABTU's annual legislative conference, McGarvey said collaborating with Republican lawmakers, who typically do not support labor-friendly policies, is essential to preserving and growing building trades unions' influence in the construction industry.

McGarvey warned that failing to work with both political parties would lead to declining market share for union construction workers, the repeal of major labor laws, like the Davis-Bacon Act, and possibly an increase in the number of right-to-work states.

"The single biggest thing that can, and will, derail the collective hopes and aspirations that we have for the union construction industry and the members we represent, is for us to make the mistake of having our fortunes tethered to one side of the shifting winds of American politics, rather than focusing on building increased support for our issues and priorities, no matter the party affiliation," McGarvey said.

According to McGarvey, the days of the building trades unions being viewed as the "hand maiden" of one political party are coming to an end.

McGarvey told Bloomberg BNA April 21 this approach ultimately is all about supporting legislators "who are actually going to move policies that lead to job creation."

"There are no permanent friends, no permanent enemies. This is a business relationship," he said.

Loosening Ties With Democrats? Historically, most of the building trades unions have supported the elections of Democrats to political offices. However, in last year's midterm elections (60 CLR 987, 11/13/14), Republicans gained control of both the House and the Senate, along with 31 state legislatures.

Since then, policies supported by the building trades unions have been challenged by Republicans in state legislatures in Nevada, West Virginia, Indiana and Wisconsin. In March, governors from Nevada and West Virginia approved laws amending the states' prevailing wage laws (61 CLR 50, 3/12/15; 61 CLR 75, 3/19/15).

Meanwhile, Wisconsin's and Indiana's legislatures are on the verge of repealing their prevailing wage laws completely (60 CLR 1409, 2/26/15).

"I wish it were different. We all wish it were different. But, the fact is this situation is not likely to change any time soon," McGarvey said.

McGarvey acknowledged that building trades members have relied on the Democratic party for support, firmly believing that Democrats and unions are "philosophical soul mates." McGarvey added, however, that unions are clashing with Democrats nearly as often as conflicts arise with Republican lawmakers.

With more Republicans in office, McGarvey said building trades unions need to adopt a bipartisan approach for their lobbying efforts to prevent any additional legislative defeats at the local, state and federal levels.

The biggest threat to the union construction industry's goals would be "having our fortunes tethered to one side of the shifting winds of American politics, rather than focusing on building increased support for our issues and priorities, no matter the party affiliation," McGarvey said.

"I realize that some may be skeptical when it comes to working with both political parties. In response to that, remember this one fundamental principle—we are a labor organization first and foremost. Politics comes second," McGarvey said.

In an April 21 interview with Bloomberg BNA, McGarvey said he believes that cooperation can be achieved once more Republicans are introduced to the building trades' methods of doing business. He said that some Republicans, like House Rep. Peter King (R-N.Y.), are already familiar with the way NABTU operates.

"If we take the time to explain our business model, they find out that a lot of the things that they don't like about the labor movement aren't things that are actually connected to the building trades," McGarvey said.

In addition to a broader bipartisan outreach strategy, McGarvey said the building trades will continue to engage and form business partnerships with companies that have been traditionally nonunion. McGarvey said these companies are beginning to understand and appreciate NABTU uses its "entire range of abilities and expertise" to improve each companies bottom line.

By JEWEL EDWARDS

To contact the reporter on this story: Jewel Edwards in Washington at jedwards@bna.com

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Karen Ertel at kertel@bna.com