

Construction Unions Leverage Social Issues to Pressure Owners, General Contractors

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Construction unions, traditionally male-dominated, are leveraging the growing presence of women in their ranks to apply pressure on owners and contractors to obtain work. This new tactic is another method in unions' "corporate campaigns" where construction unions create adverse publicity and apply political pressure on owners to hire union labor.

Recently, a local of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Works (IBEW) placed a full-page ad criticizing Wellesley College, a prestigious all-women's college, for its purported failure to support female construction workers. The IBEW criticized the college's selection of non-union contractors to perform work on a large construction project at the college. The union claimed that by hiring non-union labor, the women's college was undermining female construction workers who work for union subcontractors. It claimed that union contractors employ more female workers and apprentices than non-union contractors. The electricians' union, however, only raised this issue after losing a bid for some of the work on the project.

More and more women are joining the construction industry. One survey shows that female workers in the construction industry increased by 13 percent in two years. As a result of this increase, employers can expect more of this new "corporate campaign" tactic. Construction trade unions are being creative and tapping into prevalent social issues when applying pressure to owners of construction projects.

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