

Corporate Unionism (2)

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The poster boy of corporate unionism is Douglas McCarron, general president of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America.

McCarron turned the union of 550,000 members virtually into his personal property by transferring the authority of its 2,200 locals to 55 regional councils, whose officers were handpicked by him and conform to his wishes.

McCarron runs the union like a corporation, claiming that centralized leadership (his) is more efficient and attractive to contractors and would produce more jobs for working carpenters.

Restructuring of the locals began in May 1997, when McCarron sent a letter to the union membership in which he said: "I have determined that it is in the best interest of the United Brotherhood and its members" to begin the process of wholesale mergers of local unions.

When local unions filed complaints with the Labor Departments in both the Clinton and Bush administrations, McCarron's actions were upheld, despite ample precedents that bodies like regional councils can't usurp the powers of local unions unless council officers are directly elected by union members.

McCarron can be ruthless against those who oppose his policies. When he expected resistance from a dissident local, his agents arrived without notice, backed by uniformed police officers or sheriff's deputies. The agents grabbed books and money and changed the locks behind them.

McCarron defended the abrupt seizures as necessary. "We're talking about carpenters' families being exploited," he said. "It's terrible out there. I don't believe we moved fast enough."

McCarron's mind-set is that of a corporate executive who happens to manage a union, rather than a company. He compares his visionary approach to that of Jack Welch, the former CEO of

General Electric and an icon of American business. He refers to skilled union members as “a strong product.”

McCarron, 53, cultivates friendships with the nation’s major general contractors. Speaking to delegates at a National Erectors Association, he said: “You need to assign the work based on what makes sense. If there’s a dispute, let the owner settle it. It’s his money and his job.”

His dream is to build a multi-corporation that would supply contractors with skilled labor from all of the 15 crafts. To train such a work force, McCarron decided to build a \$22 million training center in Las Vegas, equipped with the latest construction technology, that would provide instruction in dozens of skills from laying carpets to constructing a roof to doing plumbing and electrical work.

With wall-to-wall skilled construction labor, McCarron figured he could cut favorable deals with major contractors and end up as a dominant force in the industry. However, his problem was that the leaders of the other 14 crafts were not about to surrender their personal fiefdoms without an all-out war.

McCarron, 6-feet-five-inches tall, with white hair and a beard, is an impressive personality, whose aggressive style has won him admiring friends and bitter enemies. He dropped out of high school to hang drywall in housing developments in California’s San Fernando Valley. He was not yet 30 when he was elected to head his drywallers’ local and become a member of the negotiating team of the Southern California Council of Carpenters.

McCarron’s rise to the presidency of the national union was the result of a nasty internal fight and a fluke. McCarron backed the winner, Sigurd Lucassen, in the national election. In gratitude, Lucassen named McCarron as his second vice president.

But the Labor Department declared the election was rigged and ordered a new election. Lucassen did not run. His number 2, Paschal McGuinness, had recently settled charges of labor racketeering in New York, so he was out. McCarron, the organization’s third in line, was swept into office in 1995, unopposed.

To strengthen his shaky presidency, McCarron accelerated the process of merging local unions into regional councils, assigning some of the largest to his cronies whose loyalty to him was

unquestioned. His younger brother, Michael, runs the Southwest region, which covers Arizona, Nevada and Southern California.

McCarron has won wide praise for declaring that the union spends half its budget on organizing and has hired 600 full-time organizers to recruit new members. The new organizers are given two weeks of intensive training at the Las Vegas center before being sent out to the field. McCarron says the union has gained 70,000 new members since he took office nine years ago, but there is no evidence that the union has grown, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Robert Gasperow, executive director of the Construction Labor Research Council, says that about 25% of building trades workers are union, but that carpenters as a craft are below the average. He says that the union missed its chances to expand during the construction boom years of the late 1990s. Referring to the carpenters, Gasperow says that "holding their own is probably the best they can hope for."

In 2001, McCarron decided unilaterally to disaffiliate from the AFL-CIO in disputes over the federation's poor organizing record and the carpenters' delinquency in dues payments. Many rank-and-file carpenters around the country decried the move, noting that it would aggravate problems with the other construction crafts. There were rumors that McCarron's breakaway from the AFL-CIO was part of a plan to create a separate building trades organization that he would control.

McCarron saw it as smart politics to develop a friendly relationship with President George Bush, inviting him to Labor Day picnics and union headquarters and, in return, getting to ride with the president on Air Force One. He has supported the White House on a number of issues, including the expansion of oil drilling in Alaska.

McCarron was one of several national union leaders who profited from an insiders' stock trading scheme while serving as director of the union owned Union Labor Life Insurance Company (ULLICO). With the scandal going before a grand jury and investigations by several government agencies, McCarron reluctantly decided to return about \$300,000 of his ill-gotten profits.

Opposition to McCarron's dictatorial control of the union has grown. In British Columbia, angry carpenters voted to exit from the UBC to escape from his clutches. He is faced with numerous lawsuits challenging his denial of members' rights. But there is as yet no

broad movement to unseat him and win the union back for its members.

Barring a nuclear holocaust, McCarron will get another five-year lease to run the union in his anti-democratic, corporate style, when he is reelected at the Brotherhood's 2005 convention.

Article 3: "The New Unity Partnership and Corporate Unionism" will be posted on Monday, September 20, 2004.