

GUEST COLUMN

Mitch Henck: Union die-hard fights to work

July 23, 2017

Few fighting words are quite like “the Right to Work.”

Meet sheet metal worker “Fighting” Bob Slamka.

It was the threat of Wisconsin’s Right to Work law that prompted Slamka, of Madison, to go to the state Capitol in December 2014 to protest at hearings and in the halls and offices of legislators. The law, which ultimately passed, prevents collective bargaining agreements from requiring workers to pay union dues.

Slamka never said he was speaking for his union. He said he made it clear he was speaking as a citizen. But his union wanted to control its own message and was angry at Slamka for straying from the union’s strategy. Soon after, this proud, dues-paying union member of 31 years started to take heat from his Local 18 President Patrick Landgraf.

“He accused me of misrepresenting the union,” Slamka says.

At a later protest at the Monona Terrace, Slamka said he noticed some AFL-CIO leaders telling other members not to follow Slamka. That had to hurt a guy who carries his union label inside his heart.

Slamka tried to run for president of his local against Landgraf in the summer of 2015. He lost but alleges his union rigged the election. The Department of Labor investigated with no finding of wrongdoing.

Landgraf told investigators he appointed his financial secretary to run the election. But Slamka contended the union constitution required an independent judge and two others to preside over the election, and he said that didn’t occur.

Landgraf didn’t return my calls, and an attorney for the union told me the election issue had been “resolved.”

After the election, Slamka continued to speak up at meetings, and eventually his union bosses had enough of him. In March 2016, the union kicked him out, accusing him of conduct that was detrimental to the organization. Slamka had interfered with and diminished the business manager, according to the union.

Slamka vehemently denies the charges. Soon after he was out of the union, the work dried up, and he thinks he was blacklisted. In 2016, Slamka worked three weeks for a union contractor and 10 weeks for non-union contractors.

This proud union brother is now fighting for his basic right to work. After Slamka was able to finally land a job at Zien Mechanical, laying sheet metal, the company foreman was pressured by Local 18 to fire Slamka, according to the foreman, Mike Krebsbach. The foreman said he was told at a union meeting that the leaders found out Slamka was hired by Zien Mechanical.

After Krebsbach acknowledged it was true, the business manager for the union said, "You know what to do," according to Krebsbach, also a union member. The company foreman told them he didn't do the hiring and firing there.

Later, Krebsbach said the union went to the contractor's owner to pressure him to fire Slamka.

"The owner said to put their request in writing, and when the union guy refused, the owner said 'no,'" Krebsbach said.

After that, according to Krebsbach, Local 18 demanded its union labels back so they couldn't be placed on the company products. "There were a few bad words exchanged," Krebsbach said.

Then the story gets darker. Before Slamka was kicked out of the union, he said he heard a union organizer bragging that four former union guys were hired away from a non-union contractor. This came at a time when 53 union workers were waiting to be called for work. Thinking that was odd, Slamka went to the non-union contractor involved and said he was told that three of the four guys were paying COBRA (the cost of maintaining previous health insurance) because they knew Local 18 would reimburse that cost using union health care trust funds. That's illegal, according to a Madison labor attorney.

So Slamka filed a complaint with the National Labor Relations Board, which he believes was the ultimate reason the union got rid of him.

Krebsbach said he was recently told by an investigator with the Employee Benefits Security Administration of the U.S. Department of Labor that the matter was now under criminal investigation. The same investigator told me it is EBSA policy not to confirm or deny investigations.

As for true-blue union man Bob Slamka, he is prepared to have National Right to Work lawyers help him get his union membership restored. The irony is that National Right to Work is famous for helping people get out of their unions.

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