

EDITORIALS

The PLA plague

Now airport authority mulling union payoff

San Diego labor unions have a new target in their audacious effort to make protecting and enriching unions the primary goal of government bodies. It is the board of the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority, whose nine members are appointed by a variety of elected officials, including Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sheriff Bill Kolender, Mayor Jerry Sanders and mayors from smaller cities around the county.

This morning, the board will meet to consider adopting a "project labor agreement" likely requiring the exclusive use of union labor for about \$800 million in pending improvements at Lindbergh Field.

What is the justification? A clear rationale can't be found in a consultant's 19-page report on the possibility of an airport PLA. Its tone is studiously neutral, reciting pro and con arguments without endorsement.

But in a crucial way, the report is grossly mistaken. It notes how polarized the arguments are over PLAs and glibly asserts that this polarization "has resulted in a scarcity of objective information and analysis and a wealth of reports and data which support either pro or con positions."

This carries the implications that all reports are created equal. They are not. The simplest possible way to test the bizarre claim that it is cost-effective to sharply limit bidders and require the use of more expensive workers in construction projects is to look at apples-and-apples comparisons.

Two studies by economists from

Suffolk University in Boston provide just such analysis. A 2003 review of construction projects at 52 schools in the Boston area found projects with PLAs cost at least 12 percent more per square foot. A 2004 review of 117 New York school projects that cost at least \$1 million found PLAs added 20 percent to the per-square-foot cost.

Because the latter study was funded by a business group, unions denounce it as flawed. But its methodology is simple and impeccable and has never been undercut by competing union research.

This is no surprise. The study's findings comport with common sense and with practical history. This is why, whether or not officials with San Diego Unified School District will admit it, they inevitably will have to break the campaign promises made last fall to win support for the \$2.1 billion Proposition S construction and renovation bond measure. The costly PLA that the district's board is poised to impose will make it impossible to honor those promises.

But then we've seen ample evidence that the San Diego Unified board majority simply doesn't care. Shelia Jackson, Richard Barrera and John Lee Evans are going to pay off the unions whose support they used to gain election last November, no matter how horribly it reflects on their character and competence.

Will a majority of the airport authority board show a similar contempt for the public interest? Given the many sensible folks on the board, we think they will do the right thing. We shall know for sure soon enough.