

## “After all, a healthy democracy must be inclusive.”

– Governor Gavin Newsom

**T**hese words from Governor Newsom from his January 6 inaugural address struck a particular chord for me. Not only did they go to the heart of our nation’s contentious politics, with a slight change, they hit the bullseye for the struggles of our own Labor movement: **“After all, a healthy Labor movement must be inclusive.”**

The United States, and particularly California, may very well be the most diverse society in world history. In my last visit to Costco, I heard four different languages that I could identify, not including English. We are a mishmash of different races, ethnicities, religions, sexual identities, lifestyles, political points of view – you name it. With all the frictions those differences potentially cause, it’s amazing we’re not even more divided than we are today.

But even more important, and more divisive, is the economic decline facing America’s working-class families, both blue and white collar. Extreme poverty, the obscene shift of wealth to a growing billionaire class and an increasing sense among working class families that they have been forgotten are the real threat to our society.

The housing crisis is a major and immediate example of that threat. Housing costs, ownership and rental, are astronomical and out of reach for working people. It’s been almost a century since we’ve seen this shameful level of homelessness while more and more working families are in fear of slipping into the desperate situation that they see all around them.

The obvious and necessary solution of building more housing is complicated and controversial. Even within the building trades unions there is a lack of consensus.

First some facts. There are slightly over 300,000 construction workers in the housing industry in California out of a total of slightly less than 1 million total construction workers. It is an overwhelmingly Latino, immigrant workforce. It is also overwhelmingly non-union. Residential job sites are often, and correctly, described as a crime scene, with the worst wages and working conditions in the industry.

Almost all California’s lawmakers support legislation removing procedural barriers to increase and expedite housing construction. Most of those lawmakers also believe that legislation should include prevailing wages and dramatically improved working conditions

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for the exploited workers. **We agree.** Raise their wages, give us enforcement rights, level the playing field and open the door to organizing the unorganized, all while helping California build the housing it needs.

In contrast, there are roughly 300,000 union construction workers, including union Carpenters, which dominate and are already building other projects, including public works and mega projects in the state. Their wages are the highest and their working conditions are the safest in the industry. But many of the leaders of the California Building Trades, not the Carpenters, are demanding hiring restrictions that are so rigid that even some of our union contractors say they cannot be met. They erect a barrier that excludes 300,000 exploited workers and stops increased home building in its tracks.

We see these exploited housing construction workers, whatever their background or identity, as our future members, not as a threat. Rather than exclude, we welcome them. Inclusion grows our membership, makes us stronger in the market and is the best way to protect today’s Union Carpenters. Right now, more than ever, what California and our nation needs is a strong, growing Labor movement. Keep your tools sharp, there’s plenty of work ahead.

*Danny Curtin, Director – California Conference of Carpenters*