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'Speed-dating' fuss puts minorities in the middle

In City Hall on April 9, owners of big general contracting firms will meet with a bevy of minority construction firms at a "speed-dating" networking event called "Meet the Generals."

It's gimmicky and cheesy, sure, but who could possibly object to the goal of more construction business for minority contractors?

Enter Edward Coryell, general manager of the Carpenters Union (the union is an investor in Philadelphia Media Holdings L.L.C., the owner of The Inquirer, the Philadelphia Daily News, and Philly.com).

"I can say there are labor concerns that this is a provocative event. I don't see how it's provocative, but Ed Coryell does," said Sam Sherman, president of the Building Industry Association of Philadelphia, which is taking part in the event.

Raising a fuss over an event designed to benefit minority-owned companies is an interesting move for the Carpenters Union, which was one of only four unions that did not sign off on a February agreement with the city designed to increase minority participation in the building trades.

Coryell did not return two calls to his office last week, but his secretary referred Heard in the Hall to Patrick Gillespie, business manager of the Philadelphia Building and Construction Trades Council.

Gillespie said he didn't know why Coryell objected to the event. But when told the event's lead sponsor was the Associated Builders and Contractors, a trade group of the region's nonunion firms, Gillespie had a reaction of his own.

"The whole predicate for their existence is to destroy the sanctity of collective bargaining," Gillespie said. "We couldn't hold them in any lower regard. They're as disingenuous a group as you can find. I wouldn't expect City Hall to allow the Klan to meet there, or Aryan Nation."

Wow.

ABC Southeast Pennsylvania president Jeff Zeh said the event had no antiunion agenda, and he noted that two of the big general contractors attending are union contractors.

"I would hope they could see the value in an event that's trying to provide more work opportunities to minority contractors," Zeh said.

Asked whether he were concerned union pressure would shut the event down, Zeh acknowledged he was.

"I would hope not," he said. - **Patrick Kerkstra**