Setting Our Priorities Straight

Reginald V. Castanares, Business Manager Plumbers & Fitters UA Local Union 675

(Note: This was a letter sent to and published in The Honolulu Advertiser, titled “Abercrombie put troops, facilities first”)

The Washington Post shows just how out of touch it is to the needs of our nation’s economic recovery and to the working men and women of the United States.

In an editorial reprinted in part by The Advertiser (July 7), the Post rips Congressman Neil Abercrombie for requiring that 70 percent of the workforce for a new military base in Guam be American workers who will be paid U.S. wages.

Without that provision, rest assured the facilities for our military will be substandard and good jobs will be lost to cheap foreign labor.

President Obama’s economic recovery plan is based on decent-paying jobs that will stimulate the economy. I can assure you that many of our highly skilled tradesmen who are currently unemployed in Hawaii and across the Mainland would temporarily relocate to Guam for work as our nation rides out the recession.

Instead of criticizing Neal Abercrombie, the Post should be thanking him for putting our warriors and their families first, insuring that their housing needs will be no less safe and secure than what we enjoy at home.

Vernon Taʻa Retires as UA Local 675’s Legislative Liaison

Vernon Taʻa retired Oct. 1 after serving 15 years as legislative liaison with UA Local 675. He covered legislative and administrative issues at all government levels.

State Capitol leaders lauded Taʻa as an effective lobbyist who provided information and viewpoints that even opposing parties respected and accepted as useful in their legislative presentations.

Abercrombie Paves Way

U.S. Labor Given Fair Crack For Military Work in Guam

Provisions by Hawaii Congress- man Neil Abercrombie in the latest draft of a defense appropriations bill should ensure many jobs on Guam due to planned transfer of Marines from Okinawa bases will go to American workers from Hawaii and the Mainland, according to a Washington dispatch.

The move of 8,000 Marines and an estimated 9,000 family members is set to begin next year. The accommodating infrastructure cost will run around $15 billion generating thousands of jobs and scores of large contracts, Abercrombie noted. He said the bill puts genuine competition back into play, alluding to the longtime flood of work on Guam done by underpaid foreign labor.

Required under the bill, due Congressional action before the end of October, are: continued on page 5
Getting to Know You... Better

A statewide membership means those who run a group’s headquarters will make every effort to go wherever members reside, to keep them fully updated.

That credo prompted Plumbers and Fitters Local 675’s leadership under business manager Reginald Castanares and several staffers to “talk story” and brief its Garden Island members and their families in late August at the Grand Hyatt Kaua’i in Poipu.

Billed as the first Kaua’i Membership Benefits Conference, the event focused on providing information on health care, financial investments, taxes, and legislative issues pertinent to all members and their ohana.

Congressman Neil Abercrombie, the island’s State Representatives, Hermina Morita, Roland Sagum, and James Tokioka also greeted the turnout.

Besides information on the services and benefits provided by Local 675 and the PAMCAH-UA Local 675 trust funds, the gathering enjoyed a memorable lunch and entertainment along with door prizes, including a 32" flatscreen HD TV won by Nick VanderElst. For the keiki, there was face painting, balloon animals, airbrush tattoos, and every child’s delight, the inflatable jumper.

A similar get-together for Oahu members was held on Saturday, October 3rd at the Dole Cannery Ballrooms.
Oahu Membership Benefits Conference

A pictorial montage of scenes at the Oct. 3 Dole Cannery Gathering
His first clear glimpse of Oahu was early morning from a Makaha Tower unit after a late arrival the night before. When the sunlit panorama of the rural setting had sunk in before incredulous eyes, Clarence E. Smith III’s first words were “Wow, how could I ever leave this place!”

It’s a rhetorical reaction made daily by a freshly arrived malihini, we get used to hearing. But for Smith, it proved more than prophetic. He did fly back to his former Las Vegas hometown on occasions but only to fetch his young family and for business.

Smith was lured by Cosco Fire Protection for his trade acumen, sharpened in the neon Nevada metropolis. That was where he and present and long-time partner Bruce Graham first met. After both toiled with different firms in the islands, Smith said one day a bid he had submitted to a mainland-based contractor on a Ford Island project was accepted, he promptly called his friend, then on a Maui job with Dorvin D. Leis Mechanical, if he could be enticed into a business, doing together what they both enjoy.

Smith was aware work in Federal jurisdictions does not require a contractor’s license, but he and Graham also saw equally huge opportunities outside military bases. Besides, being licensed, they reasoned, assured meaningful protection for clients. “In that regard,” he adds, “we try in all our jobs to equal or exceed federal safety standards.” That well accounts for the safety awards in all the categories entered annually with the GCA that adorn the firm’s office walls.

We’re still heavy in the military, roughly 70% of our business volume the last three years, but we’re seeing facilities across the state, including high-rises, utilities, resorts, and schools, requiring fire protection,” Smith explains. The company’s affable chief executive officer says while primarily a fire protection specialist, it has in recent years integrated fire alarms as part of a “package” that he says clients appreciate as assurance of total building safety.

Despite the economic storm clouds that have shrunk demand, Blazemasters has taken the long view in preparing for bigger market challenges by expanding its quarters at the Airport Industrial Park. By November its current 4,000 square foot offices will envelop 10,000 square feet, providing more room for its in-house design section, storage, conference room and offices comfortably housing all 30 to 40 employees, 70% of whom are in the field.

Blazemasters uniquely established a full-service design arm that allows for bidding a job that’s well-engineered. “Owners should welcome bids that are thoroughly thought out, not leaving anything to chance and guess once ground is broken. It’s a process that omits reliance on change orders, and everyone knows that if one skimps on a bid and tries to make up with changes it’s usually the client that has to cough up the difference,” Smith candidly emphasizes.

Blazemasters Fire Protection LLC
Igniting New Paths for Building Safety

A Blazemasters quartet celebrates a successful test of a foam generation system installed in the C-17 fuel cell Nose Dock hangar at Hickam Air Force Base. They are, from left, apprentice Sonny Kiaha, apprentice Felix Acevedo, working foreman Jordan Deveraturdo, and general foreman Larry Baquiran.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

It’s no secret how modest our members are about the great things they do besides their job. Ha’aheo is looking to share with your colleagues in Local 675 what you enjoy doing in the community, things that folks outside your immediate family know nothing or little about but which quietly makes a difference for the people you offer a hand to.

Your stories can be comforting in these tough economic times, and more important, shows you and Local 675 care. Any voluntary activity – assisting the handicapped, meals on wheels, fund drives, aid to the homeless, etc. Call us at 536-5454 ext. 234. Mahalo!
Shobu’s Service Emphasis Keeps Business Steady

There was no doubt about the business gene in Clayton Shobu. His parents ran a deli for many years and with the family name attached, it was natural to apply it for his own enterprise, formed a few years after working in the field following completion of his refrigeration apprenticeship.

Less than two years after leaving Oahu Air Conditioning, young Shobu, with wife Harriet as partner, started Shobu Refrigeration & Air Conditioning Inc. in 1980. They worked out of their home before moving the shop to Pohukaina St. in the Ward area.

“I decided on those specialties because they still were relatively new in the early ‘70s from a skill trade standpoint. One also couldn’t ignore the expected impact of seeing then so many climbing cranes fill the island’s skyline. Together they made for me obvious career choices,” he recalls.

Like many eager to be independent as a young adult, Shobu literally knocked on the doors of dozens of doors to get started. He also had brief liaisons in that budding period with a few smaller correlated businesses. By the fourth year he felt primed to move forward on his own.

“I sensed a few years ago the possibility of turbulence in the economy and prepared for it, first by deciding on a niche the business could comfortably handle, neither big nor small, and not going after work in highly competitive areas or which demand stifling paperwork,” he said, explaining the choice of sticking with maintenance and repair of commercial and residential structures.

The strategy has enabled the firm to provide steady work the past five years for some 13 shop employees, two supervisors, and a secretary. Administration includes just himself as its president/CEO and his wife, secretary-treasurer.

Shobu describes his operation – an annual volume between $250,000 and $500,000 – as medium.

Work on several of Safeway’s Oahu stores, including its recent major Kahului addition, and various shopping centers, has provided a sense of stability. Six months ago Safeway gave the firm reason to set up a small branch in Kahului. It also services a Kauai Safeway store in Kapaa with a crew from Oahu.

“While the economy remains challenging, there appears to be signs of a slow recovery by sometime next year,” he believes.

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• Contractors advertise and recruit U.S. workers before foreign labor can be hired.
• The Labor Department maintains broad oversight authority over contractors.
• Guam’s prevailing wages be reassessed and adjusted, if needed, to align with Mainland pay.

The bill omitted Abercrombie’s try to require that 70% of construction jobs go to U.S. workers and that wages equal those in Hawaii, but he said the approved changes offer a starting point for wage negotiations.

In Memoriam

Heartfelt sympathy and condolences to families of our brothers deceased since July 2009:

Garold E. McWhirt, Oahu 9/19
Keisei Miura, Oahu 9/10
It was prep football night October 2 at Roosevelt High, an occasion highlighted by a big contribution boost of $10,000 from the PAMCAH-UA Local 675 Trust Fund to the Oahu Interscholastic Association (OIA) to help erase its budget deficit for the current season.

The photo above shows business manager Reginald Castanares tell sportscaster Dave Vinton the organized plumbing/fitting industry is pleased to share in the community-wide support of the OIA athletic program. “We are long supporters of public school sports and the donation simply extends our continued commitment,” he said.

Others joining in the presentation of a replica of the donation shown above are Local 675 vice president Val Ceria, PAMCA executive director Gregg Serikaku, and Kahuku High School athletic director Joe Whitford, representing the OIA.

Voluntary Health/Wellness Program Hailed A Positive Step for Employees

An HMSA program for member companies offers employees an individual health checkup done at the workplace.

Called Health Pass, it is a novel but effective way to provide the worker a reliable assessment of his or her current medical condition. When completed a copy of the report is mailed to the employee’s personal physician as a “back-up” during the employee’s subsequent visits.

It’s an inexpensive approach to making preventative health care more effective. The assessment takes just a half hour, time enough to provide information about the participant’s weight, nutrition, exercise, stress management and other related health-impinging factors.

Local 675 is among the initial groups responding to the voluntary HMSA program.

“We feel it’s another important step for a company to take toward ensuring that its employees maintain good health habits,” notes business manager Reginald Castanares.

(See accompanying article “Check on your health and win a prize!”)

Check on Your Health And Win A Prize

Evaluate your health and lifestyle behavior by taking an HMSA Health Risk Assessment (HRA) and get a chance to win a worthwhile prize. The HRA is a simple questionnaire asking about your health and lifestyle. It takes just 20 minutes to complete.

Employee participants submitting their completed HRA by Oct. 31 get a chance for a Chevron Gas Card. A drawing will be made for three $150 gas cards and one $50 gas card.

You can complete the HRA online at https://healthpass.isi-hawaii.com/Promo, using the Promo Code: PC200. If you prefer to complete a paper HRA form, call the H&W Fund (808-536-4408) for the form.

The HRA is a part of the HealthPass process. If you complete the entire HealthPass process by Dec. 31, 2009, get an “Appointment Verification Form” from the HealthPass Center and submit it to the H&W Fund, it will send you a $20 check.

Only employee participants are eligible for the gas card drawing. Employees and their covered dependents are, however, both eligible for the $20.

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(See accompanying article “Check on your health and win a prize!”)
A Show of Brotherhood
UNITY PICNIC DRAWS UNION FAMILIES

Infant and young faces meshed with those of parents and grandparents all enjoying the camaraderie of Hawaii’s building trades unions on a sunny, sultry Labor Day at the Waikiki Shell. For that period of funfest the troubles of a sour economy were left pretty much at home.

Picnickers didn’t forget families with empty cupboards, bringing packages of canned goods and other non-perishables for distribution by the Hawaii Food Bank.

There wasn’t a straw poll, but if one were taken, the Plumbers tent might have likely been the favorite with the huge turnout for its slush and ice cream mix. Given the almost blistering sun much of the day, the line to the Plumbers’ dispensing booth seemingly was unending.

“We’re elated that so many came with their youngsters and to share and commemorate a day that has traditionally exemplified the united strength of organized labor,” business manager Reginald Castanares said.

He commended the staff and other 675 employees and volunteers for assistance at the event.

Ceria, Williams Earn Welding Certifications

For the first time UA Local 675 will have an “in-house” certified welding inspector.

Union vice-president and business agent Val Ceria (at right) last August passed the rigid exam administered by the American Welding Society at the UA’s training center in Ann Arbor, MI.

Ceria joined the Plumbers and Fitters Local Union 675 in December 1979 and worked in the field until October 2006 when he joined the staff as a business agent. “I’m grateful for the opportunity to help increase the value of staff services, important to the growth of members of our Local,” Ceria said.

The UA announced that another Local 675 member, welder Donald R. Williams, recently completed a 40-hour ATR (Authorized Testing Representative) course, qualifying the recent retiree to provide welding testing services in the Local’s jurisdiction. Williams became an apprentice with a mainland local in 1970 and as a journeyman transferred to Local 675 in December 1984.

“We’re fortunate and pleased with the national certification of both Val and Don, as they will provide a boost to our apprenticeship and training program that will ensure time and cost savings,” Reginald Castanares, business manager, said.
Plumbers and Fitters
United Association
Local 675
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PENSION BENEFIT EXTENDED
The PAMCAH-UA Local 675 Board of Trustees has approved extension of the $167 per retirement year factor for pension benefit units earned through August 31, 2010.

Translated, that means as an example, a retiree with 10 credited pension years with no break in service, is entitled to $167 x 10 equaling $1,675 as his pension benefit per month.

“We’re pleased for the trustees’ action benefiting all retirees, in light of a continuing severe economy,” business manager Reginald Castanares said.

Five New Pensioners
Local 675 warmly welcomes the following new retirees:

Michael T. Fujita  8/1/09
Wayne T. Okubo  8/1/09
Thomas M. Sakata  9/1/09
Vernon K. Tā’a  10/1/09
Warren H. Yamashiro  8/1/09

Retirees Club Events
Nov. 10: 8:30 a.m. Moanalua Golf Course Clubhouse breakfast meeting.
Nov. 18: 11:10 a.m. Teeoff, Pali Golf Course.
Call Glenn Hashimoto, 383-9633.