

Local

VCF Employment RP 5/8/91 p. 9

County supervisors adopt prevailing-wage law

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Santa Cruz County will require contractors to pay a "prevailing wage" — equivalent to union wages — on redevelopment projects that receive major subsidies of public funds.

County supervisors adopted that policy yesterday after hearing three hours of public testimony from a crowd of 175, the vast majority of whom sported cards saying "Fair Wages, Yes."

The meeting was punctuated by boos and occasional catcalls, but no wild outbursts.

The prevailing-wage rule was suggested by the Solidarity Committee of the county's Central Labor Council, which will now ask the four cities in the county to adopt the policy, said former Santa

Cruz Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt, now director of the Solidarity Committee. The supervisors' action will affect only a few projects in the unincorporated area.

Wormhoudt said the committee has no intention of trying to impose the prevailing-wage policy on other professions or to private projects, a fear that opponents of the policy had expressed. The Solidarity Committee has emphasized that it is pushing the prevailing-wage policy for redevelopment projects because they involve substantial public funds.

Under the state's formula, the prevailing wage is virtually always the union wage. Union carpenters in Santa Cruz County make \$20.43 an hour, plus a benefit package worth about \$6.50 an hour.

There were no surprises during

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the public testimony. Opponents said the policy is a government intrusion into private business, and those favoring the rule said it guarantees a fair wage and prevents non-union contractors from having an unfair advantage in bidding on publicly financed projects.

Tom Hopkins, owner of a non-union construction company and a chief opponent of the policy, has said he pays workers \$16 to \$22 an hour, plus benefits.

There were no surprises in the

board's vote, either. The lone dissenter was Pajaro Valley Supervisor Ray Belgard, the most conservative board member.

"I'm not against fair wages," Belgard said, "but I don't believe it (prevailing wage) is going to solve all the problems you folks say it will."

Belgard expressed concern that the policy "sets a precedent for spreading into other areas."

Supervisor Gary Patton argued that the prevailing wage "is good

policy. We all want to get things as cheaply as we can," he said, but not when it means "ripping off individuals in the community in the name of a better life for all of us."

Patton mentioned that state and federal laws have required prevailing wages on public construction projects since 1931.

Several speakers charged that non-union contractors can make abnormally high profits. Instead of bidding a price for their costs and a reasonable profit, the speakers said, the contractors can make more money by bidding just under what a union contractor might. It's the contractor, not the workers, who gets the "extra" money, the speakers said.

Patton pointedly asked Ken Cleavland, of the Association of

Builders and Contractors, if that is the case.

"The lowest (bidding) responsible employer should get the job," said Cleavland, who said unions are making efforts to run non-union shops out of business.

Contractors, Cleavland said, "are not making a lot of profit" these days.

Many of the pro-labor speakers said being paid union wages is a sure way to avoid having to rely on social services.

"You will never have to put up a fence around the Town Clock to keep me out," said Phillip Nelson, who retired this year from a career as a union cement finisher. His reference was to the use of the area around the Town Clock in Santa Cruz by homeless people.