

Labor Unions are Now Filing Grievances against Goats

A major union is rallying its supporters to battle the latest job-stealing enemy: goats.

The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the University of Michigan have had a well-established working relationship with each other for years. But this is largely because the labor union holds a contract with the school, barring it from hiring non-AFSCME members for various positions. Landscaping is among the many career fields supported by the union and is actually at the center of this latest controversy.

While the university has traditionally employed AFSCME landscapers to tend to the school's outdoor grass-trimming needs during the summer, the school has –albeit on accident– gone a different route this season and union members are anything but pleased.

Blame It on the Livestock

Tasked with clearing poisonous brush and overgrown vegetation that is both extremely difficult for humans to remove and all the more plentiful in the summer months, the university decided to utilize goats to get the job done. Renting a team of 20 goats from local residents, the livestock were expected to complete the 15-acre clearing job before students returned to campus in the fall.

But the goats exceeded all expectations and instead of completing the job by the end of the summer, they fulfilled their task in a matter of weeks. Since the goats had been rented for the season and were still in the care of the university, they were allowed to graze on campus property after they had finished clearing the overgrowth. While this

was not the campus' original intent, this grazing allowed the goats to feed themselves while the university received a cost-effective lawn mowing service on campus. But not all parties saw this cheap labor as a win/win for the campus community.

As animals, the goats themselves were not privy to the terms of the AFSCME's contract with the school and made the grave error of eating grass that existed outside of the designated 15-acre clearing area. Unfortunately, trimming grass on campus property is a job-protected in the labor union's contract with the university, making these goats "scabs" in the eyes of the AFSCME.

In a recent grievance filed against the university, the union asserts that "goat crews" on campus have jeopardized the livelihood of its members, specifically its landscapers who are currently out of work. The union claims that these animals have effectively stolen employment opportunities from its members since the goats have essentially offered the same service but at a much lower cost. As a result, the AFSCME believes that the school is in violation of its collective bargaining contract with the union and has sought legal action.

The union's president, Dennis Moore, commented on the matter saying, "AFSCME takes protecting the jobs of its members very seriously and we have an agreed-upon collective bargaining agreement with Western Michigan." He continued, "We expect the contract to be followed, and in circumstances where we feel it's needed, we file a grievance."

The university's spokesperson, Cheryl Roland, responded to this by explaining that, "For the second summer in a row, we've brought in a goat crew to clear undergrowth in a woodlot, much of it poison ivy and other vegetation that is a problem for humans to remove. Not wanting to use chemicals, either, we chose the goat solution to stay environmentally friendly." Roland also added that "The area is rife with

poison ivy and other invasive species, and our analysis showed the goats to be a sustainable and cost-effective way of removing them.”

But as ridiculous this entire debacle is, and it is surely ridiculous, these claims are anything but new. Competition is the enemy of coercive labor unions, who have always depended on the long arm of the state to prop up their monopoly over certain sectors. This is as true today as it was in the 19th century when protectionism in France was becoming all the more common.

The Candle Makers

In Frederic Bastiat’s brilliant satirical essay, “[Candlestick Makers’ Petition,](#)” he uses hyperbole to highlight the absurdity of the claims espoused by the AFSCME, well over a century before Michigan’s “goatgate” even began.

Written in 1845 as an open letter to French Parliament, Bastiat penned the essay on behalf of the “Manufacturers of Candles, Tapers, Lanterns, sticks, Street Lamps, Snuffers, and Extinguishers, and from Producers of Tallow, Oil, Resin, Alcohol, and Generally of Everything Connected with Lighting.” The grievances contained in his essay were aimed at the enemy of all those in the “light business”: the sun.

“We are suffering from the ruinous competition of a rival who apparently works under conditions so far superior to our own for the production of light that he is flooding the domestic market with it at an incredibly low price,” Bastiat writes. He then calls upon Parliament to remedy this unfair competition by asking for the following:

“We ask you to be so good as to pass a law requiring the closing of all windows, dormers, skylights, inside and outside shutters, curtains, casements, bull’s-eyes, deadlights, and blinds – in short, all openings, holes, chinks, and fissures through which the light of the sun is

wont to enter houses, to the detriment of the fair industries with which, we are proud to say, we have endowed the country, a country that cannot, without betraying ingratitude, abandon us today to so unequal a combat.”

In a not-so-subtle jab aimed at members of French Parliament who often pretended to support consumers by instituting monopolies for their “own well-being” Bastiat says:

“You no longer have the right to invoke the interests of the consumer. You have sacrificed him whenever you have found his interests opposed to those of the producer. You have done so in order to encourage industry and to increase employment. For the same reason, you ought to do so this time to.”

Bastiat’s “Candlemaker’s Petition” was a satirical exaggeration to make a point: imagining producers asking the government for protection against competition offered by a part of nature. Yet today, we have a union earnestly doing exactly that in real life. 21st-century reality has become more absurd than 19th-century satire.

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