

We're Only Scamming Ourselves

I found the article "Speaking Spanish to Stay Afloat" (*Viewpoint*, 9/04) not only true to my experience but also deeply disturbing. Our nation is being overrun (4,000 per day into Arizona alone) and our particular industry is being taken from us. What's more, we have only ourselves to blame.

The employment of illegals presents benefits to the GC that go beyond low pay. Avoiding payroll taxes, workers' comp premiums, and bookkeeping fees adds appeal. In addition, the intimidation inherent in working illegally can deter laborers from addressing workplace disputes, injustices, or even injuries. Combined, these factors present a very seductive cost-saving package to the contractor.

In the past, occasionally using cheap labor meant increased profits to those contractors choosing to engage in shady hiring practices. But now, with essentially everyone engaged in the activity, it has become a necessity. Because it costs more, legal above-board employment is in some areas more of a threat to business survival.

Believing that all illegal workers are hardworking, honest, and reliable while their American counterparts are all lazy, incompetent, and disinterested in their particular kind of work is preposterous. Such rumor-mongering as a way of excusing an untenable situation is nothing more than a way to assuage our guilt and rationalize our illegal practices. Some illegals may be hardworking at times (like the rest of us), but since they are here illegally, accepting pay illegally, using fake IDs, and so forth, they can hardly be generalized as "honest." In addition, willing American workers cannot realistically enter such a workplace due to the low pay and poverty-level lifestyle.

As this problem develops, the losers will be the American workers, of course, but also the general contractors, as well as the perpetually underpaid illegal worker. The beneficiary will be the property owner, who, because of construction cost savings on the one hand and inflationary increases in property value on the other, will become wealthier than ever.

The solution is not difficult, at least in concept. Simply not hiring illegals may be the most obvious first response, but for now, this would probably have negative effects. None of us, taken singly, can realistically be expected to change our own habits without the risk of being quickly underpriced by our noncompliant competitors.

What we all can do, however, is exert pressure on our government representatives to enforce laws that already exist: those that control immigration, contractor licensing, employment practices, liability and workers' compensation insurance, and taxation itself. We must insist that our government stop all of us from engaging in this activity.

The choice is ours. We can each continue as we have, reaping the short-term benefits of a scam that will eventually erode the ground from under us. Or, we can start now, each doing what we can, to level the field and return to a system that is fair and reasonable.

Robert James
Corvallis, Ore.

Nobody But Us, Jack

Regarding the piece on immigrant labor (*Viewpoint*, 9/04), there are a couple of things that always seem to get left out of the discussion.

First, just as there is no way a legitimate contractor can compete price-wise with somebody working out of

his truck or on the side for cash, how many business owners can compete with someone using the casual labor-for-cash guys down at the 7-Eleven if they are going to file an income tax and play by the rules?

The legal temp-labor outfits that the contractor in the article had tried take a pretty big bite out of a check. It used to be, here in Washington state, that the employment office ran a casual labor pool down at the local branch office. You got down there at 5:30 or 6 a.m. and signed up. People called in and you got sent out on anything from lawn jobs to factory work to construction sites. You were paid in cash and, if things worked out, you might even get a full-time job out of the deal, which is how I got started in the game. In other words, back then it wasn't always illegal to pay cash for labor. Not anymore. We license, bond, insure, approve, inspect, tax, and regulate anything that shows a sign of life or initiative.

Second, this country is full of immigrants; in fact, there ain't nobody here but us immigrants, Jack. And that includes Native Americans, who most likely displaced somebody else previously. But, for starters, the distinction is "illegal." When my grandpa got here, getting sent home for being here illegally was not an empty threat.

While political opportunists on both sides of the aisle may use the issue to their benefit, the costs of illegal immigration over the long run considerably outweigh any short-term savings gained from the get-it-built-cheap-today attitude.

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Sealed Crawlspace Follow-Up

As a certified mold inspector and remediator, I'd like to comment on "Fixing a Wet Crawlspace" (8/04).

First, the photo on page 1 shows the workers without any personal protective equipment, which the EPA recommends for all mold-remediation projects.

Second, the author mentions high humidity and preliminary dehumidification before sealing the area. I don't think it likely that the crawlspace will remain permanently dehumidified under the ambient conditions. A dehumidifier should have been permanently installed. Nothing in a crawlspace will ever be airtight. The wall plates that were shown to be in direct contact with the saturated earth will continue to degrade and wick moisture into the wall framing above them, even though covered at the inner surfaces with 6-mil poly. The moisture will then humidify the crawlspace. The carpeting near the entry might create a nice perception, but it is a haven for mold growth when exposed to high humidity and moisture.

The client should be advised that this project is a short-term Band-Aid approach to the problem.

Tom Schultz
Minnetonka, Minn.

Author Jeff Tooley responds: I agree with much of what you say. Our workers do in fact wear full-face organic vapor respirators when treating the mold. We use nontoxic chemicals, so we don't need pressure-assisted masks. In that photo, we've already treated the mold and the workers are raking out the soil in preparation for laying the poly.

As the article pointed out, I advised the homeowner to replace the wood cripple walls with something more durable. Her plan, as soon as the budget allows, is to build a structural brick perimeter wall beneath the house.

The carpet is actually there precisely for the reason you state — because it is an excellent medium for mold growth. If the homeowner — or a mold inspector, for that matter — sees mold on that carpet, she'll know that there's a problem and she can call me back to check things out. It's also the reason we install humidity alarms, which let the homeowner know if the crawlspace RH exceeds 70 percent. I have successfully sealed more than 2,000 crawlspaces over the last eight years, and these techniques continue to work.

Another Remodeler Risk

The article on arsenic in old plaster (*In the News*, 7/04) brought to mind another legacy remodelers need to consider — lead in old ceramic-tile glaze. This lead presents virtually no problem

as long as it is not mechanically or chemically disturbed. If the glaze is disturbed as part of a demolition project, it can contaminate the ambient air and surrounding area. This problem is easily managed using personal-protection safety methods and containment barriers, followed by thorough cleaning.

The critical element is to know, in advance, that the tile glaze contains lead.

Judson Bryant
Houston

Shear Wall Guide

The shear-wall book (*Resources*, 9/04) looks like a super resource. I didn't find it through www.iccsafe.org (they knew nothing about it), but at www.bookmarki.com, for less than \$40.

Chuck Cunningham
Santa Barbara, Calif.

KEEP 'EM COMING!

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