Report on a Case by the Board of Ethical Review

Case No. 84-6

Participation in Protest Action as Part of a Political Campaign

Facts:
Engineer A is a candidate for the state legislature from a district in which there is a substantial percentage of unskilled workers who are represented by a union. In a particular plant where many of these employees work, the third worker in a year was killed recently in an industrial accident. After many discussions between workers and management, the workers set up a picket line to protest what they claim are unsafe working conditions and alleged management indifference to employee safety. During the political campaign Engineer A visits the picket site and participates without having visited the plant to investigate the specific conditions of the previous accident. With TV cameras focused on him, Engineer A holds up a placard which accuses the company of callous disregard for the workers and then joins the protesting employees in the picket line.

Question:
Was it unethical for Engineer A to accuse the company of callous disregard for the workers at the plant?

References:
Code of Ethics - Section II.3. - "Engineers shall issue public statements only in an objective and truthful manner."

Section III.1.e. - "Engineers shall not actively participate in strikes, picket lines, or other collective coercive action."

Section III.1.f. - "Engineers shall avoid any act tending to promote their own interest at the expense of the dignity and integrity of the profession."

Section III.2.a. - "Engineers shall seek opportunities to be of constructive service in civic affairs and work for the advancement of the safety, health, and well-being of their community."

Discussion:
As has been frequently stated by this Board and is clearly stated in the NSPE Code of Ethics, engineers are encouraged to participate in civic affairs and to become involved in political activity. This position is embodied in Section III.2.a. As has been noted before, this provision is a recognition of the valuable and unique perspective of the engineer and the enormous contribution that the engineer can make to public policy debates.

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Certainly, participation by the engineer in the sphere of public policy must be tempered by a sense of reason and rationality. Engineers are expected to act in such matters in a responsible and prudent manner. While no one would ever suggest that engineers should not be opinionated or even vigorous in their political views, we think that it is correct to state that engineers have an ethical obligation to conduct such activities with an eye on objectivity and truthfulness. Without these basic guidelines, the engineer is in danger of losing credibility among members of both the profession and the community as a whole.

Under the facts of this case there appears to be a genuine question as to whether Engineer A's actions were in an objective and truthful manner as required by Section II.3. The most obvious point seems to be that the comments were made primarily for political purposes—to drum up support among union employees by suggesting that Engineer A is sympathetic to their cause. The action also appears to have been made to provide Engineer A with a great deal of media exposure before the television cameras.

While it is certainly arguable that Engineer A was legitimately concerned with the issues of unsafe working conditions at the plant and what he saw to be management indifference, another issue of concern is the manner in which Engineer A addressed the issues of unsafe working conditions and management indifference. Rather than examining the allegation and attempting to mediate the differences between the parties, Engineer A appears to have furthered the conflict by making rhetorical pronouncements. By holding a placard that accused the company of "callous indifference" to the workers, Engineer A injected himself into the controversy and lost any and all appearances of impartiality. Engineer A attempted to exploit an extremely unpleasant situation for political gain.

Finally, the Board is concerned with the actions of Engineer A because it appears that Engineer A was promoting his own interest at the expense of the dignity and integrity of the profession (Section III.1.f.). Under the facts, there is little doubt that Engineer A's act of thrusting himself before television cameras with the placard in hand, without thoroughly investigating the specific conditions within the plant, suggests that Engineer A was seeking to promote his own interests, (i.e., his political career), at the expense and dignity of the profession.

There appears to be some question here as to whether Section III.1.e. applies to Engineer A. That provision related to individuals who, as employees, actively participate in strikes, picket lines, or other collective coercive action. In this case, Engineer A was not an employee but was a candidate for office who was sympathetic to a particular cause. While we do not condone Engineer A's actions, we do not think Section III.1.e. is applicable to this case.

Conclusion:
It was unethical for Engineer A to accuse the company of callous disregard for the workers at the plant.

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