

Workers urge union hires for construction at Assembly Square

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SOMERVILLE

More than 40 workers from various construction unions pamphleted Assembly Row March 23, calling for developer Federal Realty to hire union for construction projects at Assembly Square.

Trade workers ranging from carpenters, painters, electricians, sprinkler fitters, jackers to brick masons and pipe insulators battled the blistering cold while passing out their flyers. The flyers asked people to call, email and urge Federal Realty to hire a general contractor that will use union labor when constructing a planned apartment building on Assembly Square.

"I'm out here because I'm unemployed and they are going to be developing the property over here and the company that they are getting to develop the property is a non-union company," Somerville resident and painter's union member Tom Walsh told the Journal. "They are bringing in workers from out of state... It's very frustrating."

The protest came a few months after the Board of Aldermen passed a resolution "strongly urging" Federal Realty Investment Trust to hire union workers and give preference to qualified Somerville residents during future construction at Assembly Square. And Mayor Joe Curtatone told the Journal he also backed that resolution.

"I agree with [the board's] position and it is going to be up to Federal Realty to do what they are going to do," Curtatone said.

Curtatone told the Journal March 24 that he has helped facilitate discussions between the two sides but said discussions haven't been held for around three months. He said he hopes to bring the two sides back to the table again soon. He said, if the project's workforce doesn't get paid proper wages and benefits, the city may take some sort of legal action.

"Those who skirt the law for personal gain, we will pay close attention," Curtatone said.

Federal Realty has developed Assembly Row and plans on constructing a large building at parcel 6 of Assembly Square that will include retail and restaurant space on the bottom floor and 447 residential units above. Federal Realty Boston President Don Briggs told aldermen in January that hiring 100 percent union labor at the parcel would be too expensive and would force the square's developer FRIT to raise apartment unit rents exponentially. He said he has been in talks with the labor unions and said he plans on hiring some union workers on the site, but did not say what percentage.

FRIT Spokesman Andrea Simpson on Tuesday did not tell the Journal what contractor they planned on hiring but said the company has been in discussions with a number of trade unions and anticipates some union participation in the project.

"We encourage all trades to participate in the final bid process," Simpson said. "Additionally, we will be working with whoever we chose as our construction partner to make sure quality jobs are available and we will work with them and the city to support hiring local Somerville residents."

On March 23, Paul Hughes, business agent for the Carpenters Union Local 218 told the Journal the workers will be passing around flyers throughout the square everyday until FRIT agrees to use union labor for the project. Hughes said it's been months since Briggs has answered their calls or held any discussions with trade unions. He said he has seen no indication that FRIT plans on hiring any union workers whatsoever for the project. He said instead, FRIT plans on hiring Bridgewater-based contractor Callahan Construction to complete the project, which will complete the project for far less, but has a history of hiring non-union, out-of-state and undocumented workers with shoddy pay and no benefits.

“By comparing those two, a union firm to that particular non-union general contractor, its not apples to apples, its not even apples to bananas,” Hughes said. “There’s no way that a reputable firm of any kind would be able to compete with a bottom-feeder like Callahan Construction.”

Jack Lister, a Somerville resident and business manager for a local insulators and asbestos workers union told the Journal he doesn't want to see Somerville residents traveling across New England to work, when a major luxury apartment complex is being constructed right in their own backyards.

“Why should they have to travel with them in their own hometown,” Lister said. “You know what the rents are, you know what they are selling condos for and then they don't want to pay you to build it. It's quality of life and taking care of the people in the city.”

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