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## Construction Workers Feel Frustrated, Despite Demand

By Joe Maniscalco



Greater demand, but fewer opportunities for construction workers?

New York, NY - Career construction workers fearing the further proliferation of junk jobs that offer men and women in the industry low-wages and little else, say that their prospects are in sharp decline despite the current building boom taking place throughout the city — and an enthusiastic new analysis from the NY Building Congress isn't making them feel any better.

According to the NY Building Congress, well over half of New York City residents employed in the building industry also work in the same borough in which they live. The findings are based on the latest U.S. Census data compiled in 2013.

The NY Building Congress, further finds that almost 70 percent of Staten Island residents employed in the construction industry were, at least in 2013, able to secure work in their home borough. The number for Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx workers, appear encouraging as well, coming in at 64, 58 and 55 percent respectively.

Those figures, however, do little to comfort career-oriented, union construction workers concerned that efforts to rezone neighborhoods in places like East New York, the South Bronx and East Harlem for affordable housing, will come at the cost of good jobs.

“The majority of workers that have union books don't live and work in the same borough,” said Barrie Smith, business agent, Construction and General Building Laborers Local 79. “We have a lot of members that hold union books, and we have a lot of this work that's been allocated — but we can't even put them to work because a lot of this stuff is not even union.”

Union construction jobs are distinct from their non-union counterparts in that they offer better pay and benefits, job training, worker protections and more. The NY Building Congress' analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau's

latest data, however, does not distinguish between union and non-union jobs. The same analysis also finds that only half of all building industry workers responding to the 2013 survey had healthcare.

Be that as it may, Richard Anderson, president of the 94-year-old NY Building Congress, is critical of those taking issue with the city's rezoning efforts.

"Rezoning creates jobs," Anderson told LaborPress. "We have to concentrate on creating jobs, and then the union, non-union breakdown is a separate challenge. You want the jobs to fight over, and once you've got them, what organized labor has to do is make its best case. There are a lot of ways of doing that. But to oppose rezoning because some of the jobs might be non-union, I think that's a questionable tactic."

Despite the rosy view it takes on living and working in New York City, the NY Building Congress analysis does point out that diversity and equal opportunity in the construction industry is sorely lacking.

The latest findings show that Black non-Hispanic workers constitute only 13 percent of the workforce, while Asian workers represent just 10 percent. Overall, women in the industry are faring the worst, constituting even less than 10 percent of the total workforce.

"More and more, the construction workforce is reflecting the population and breakdown of New York City," Anderson said. "It's moving in that direction. We're not quite there yet. And part of it is that architects, engineers and management are sort of behind, but the actual tradespeople are much more reflective of the population breakdown of New York City."

But here, too, Smith points out that diversity in the construction industry could be encouraged through the creation of good, career-oriented jobs - the kinds of union jobs that come with apprenticeship programs and the resources to actually afford "affordable housing."

"The reason why the numbers are not higher is because we have a wall basically being built up as far as non-career oriented jobs and career-oriented jobs," Smith said. "I have close to 650 members in East New York, and a lot of those members are minorities who live in the area, born and raised, but are unable to work. People become frustrated when they see themselves having to do this non-union work because that's the only opportunity that's awarded to them."

Feelings of frustration and a lack of opportunity seem incongruous in the middle of a building boom.

"This is the time of high demand, the construction market has never been stronger than it is right now, and we need people," Anderson said. "And the ones who are the best candidates of those who live in the city."

To truly and effectively confront income inequality, Smith said he would like to see Mayor Bill de Blasio and his cabinet "sit down, do more negotiating and listen to more voices."

"The way things are going now, it is not fighting income inequality because people are going to be left with short-term jobs, and that's a problem," Smith said. "Who can survive on \$12 an hour in 2015? They [the de Blasio administration] just want to build and get it done quickly. But they're not worried about the affect that it has on people."