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http://www.crainsnewyork.com/article/20170914/OPINION/170919948/union-construction-in-the-city-is-stronger-than-new-study-indicates

Union construction in the city is stronger than new study indicates

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To the editor:

Re: Greg David's "Unions bolster their NYC bulwark," the Murphy Institute report by Ruth Milkman and Stephanie Luce is a valuable and indispensable contribution to our understanding of the pattern of union membership among New York City residents. Their research methods are highly credible. However, the 31.5% figure shown in Table 3 from their report needs to be refined considerably as an indication of the extent of unionization in the city's construction sector.

There are two significant limitations in their data, drawn from the Current Population Survey, that make the 31.5% figure of limited value in understanding the union role among New York City construction trades. First, the denominator in their "union density" calculation includes a significant portion of managerial and administrative construction employees; and second, they look only at city residents, not trades workers who commute to city construction sites.

While government data does not exist to allow us to say with precision what city construction worker union density is, adjusting for suburban commuters working in the city and factoring out non-trades workers undoubtedly would result in a much higher figure. A higher figure would also be consistent with the building trades union membership data included in the appendix to the Murphy report. The aggregate membership for the building trades unions listed there is over 140,000.

But what does union density mean in New York City, where there is an extremely wide range of skills involved in construction projects, arguably a broader range than anywhere else in the country? The skills involved in single-family home building and remodeling work are much different than on highly complicated development projects such as rail tunnels several stories below street-level or soaring (and technologically sophisticated) skyscrapers like 1 World Trade Center.

According to the New York Building Congress, the city has a $43 billion construction market. If union density were measured in terms of the dollar value of construction projects built union, density would likely be two-thirds or greater, reflecting the greater skills and higher productivity of unionized skilled trades workers. Unionization is undoubtedly much higher for infrastructure projects, large-scale commercial, and larger residential construction projects than for smaller residential projects.

None of this is to say that the city's nonunion construction workers wouldn't be much better off if they were covered by a union contract. They would not only be better paid, but would have access to an extensive apprenticeship training program (including safety training) as well as good health care benefits and an employer-paid pension. A union card is a ticket to the middle class, pure and simple.

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