Carpenters Local 40 Protests MIT's Hiring Practices

Union, from Page 1

Another group of union members has been picketing at the 640 Memorial Drive site. On Saturday, Carpenters Local 40 organized a larger protest involving 30 union members. The event was specifically targeted toward parental visiting, campus for Family Weekend. The union handed out leaflets outlining the dispute and began, "Welcome to Family Weekend. Here is what MIT is doing to local families."

The MIT administration has more or less ignored the union's protests. "The dispute should be between Local 40 and Erland Construction. That's what the labor laws say. When they picket in front of MIT, they are committing an illegal act that we have and will probably continue to ignore," said Senior Vice President William R. Dickson '56.

"Economic sustainability" a factor

The Real Estate Office, now took the renovation with the intention that the building would become a for-profit commercial development. Endowment funds will be used to pay for the project, according to the Mark A. Barred, the project manager. The building's major tenant, LifeLine Systems Inc., is expected to occupy 60 percent of the building.

MIT officials maintain that the decision to hire Erland was made for serious economic reasons. "When we Real Estate Office was looking at it, it became a close call over economic sustainability. We looked closely at the prices and the savings, and the savings [from going with Erland] were significant," said Ronald P. Suduiko, assistant to the President for Government and Community Relations at MIT.

The building "is not an academic building. It is an investment building," Suduiko said. According to Dickson, MIT will save approximately $2 million dollars by going with Erland. "If rent makes the difference, $2 million is a big deal. MIT won't think academic money into that," he said.

"Everything is so tight, and everyone knows everyone's numbers. There's no way there could be such a difference," said Erlich.

Tumor Construction, one of the contractors not awarded the project, alleges that the difference is non-existent, Erlich added.

Non-union workers cheaper

Erlich contends that "MIT is trying to take advantage of the recession and unemploying by hiring the cheap labor. It's that you can find people who are willing to work for $8-$10 an hour with no benefits." He added, "MIT is undermining the standards out there."

In a Sept. 11 letter to the MIT faculty and staff, Erlich wrote, "There is a depression, not a recession, in construction. In this environment, non-union contractors can find enough desperate workers to work under any conditions - cash under the table, no health benefits, and no workers' compensation coverage. These conditions are no longer the exception in the non-union sector, they are the rule."

Dickson responded by saying that wages may not have made the difference between hiring Erland and another contractor. "It seems to me that all the savings [from Erland] are in labor. If they are, a lot of it isn't hourly wages, it may be benefits. It's not easy to tell where the savings come from."

"Merit-based shop" policy in use

Suduiko said the project is being conducted as a "merit-based shop" job. According to MIT, this means that as the general contractor, Erland must accept bids from sub-contractors whether they be union or non-union.

"What the merit-shop means is when a non-union contractor can't get a quality job done, they hire a union contractor, but when they can get away with it, they will use a non-union one," Erlich said.

Sudokko pointed out over the last 15 years, MIT has built 24 projects. Of these, all but four were union. These 20 projects were worth a total of $150 million dollars, which is 98.6 percent of the total value of those projects.

"MIT paid the union contractors as well as the new tenant to believe that union contractors would be used, as in the past," Erlich said. He added that MIT has had a tradition of using union contractors. Erlich was concerned that the new decision may lead to a precedent of using non-union contractors for MIT projects.

There are currently 15 to 20 subcontractors working on the project, two of which are union, according to Suduiko.

One union subcontractor that was offered a contract refused it because of an affiliation with Carpenter's Local 49. "It seems to me they are defeating their own purpose by refusing to bid or accept contracts," Dickson said.

Erlich and Dickson have met to discuss the situation several times. However, both report that despite the meetings being cordial and "pleasant," no progress has been made on a resolution to the problem. Future meetings are in the works, according to Dickson.

Brian Rosenberg contributed to the reporting of this story.

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