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ABC MA chairman's message: Fighting exclusionary project labor agreements

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New data show that nearly 90% of U.S. construction workers choose not to join a union. In Massachusetts, it's more than 82%, according to federal Bureau of Labor Statistics data analyzed by unionstats.com. The open shop numbers are even higher among African-American construction workers. Yet once again we find ourselves fighting a union-only project labor agreement (PLA).

This time it's the Springfield Water and Sewer Commission, which voted to use a PLA to build the West Parish Water Treatment Plant. The 2-1 vote came after unions made a full presentation to the commission. Those opposed to the PLA, including ABC MA president Greg Beeman, got three minutes to make their cases during the public comment section of one of the commission's meetings.

The commission's own lawyer urged commissioners not to approve the PLA. So egregious are these policies that exclude the vast majority of the Commonwealth's construction workforce that the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court has ruled that they violate state bidding laws unless very specific conditions exist. Commission attorney Norm Guz told commissioners that he did not believe the PLA met these conditions.

A couple of basic concepts are in play when PLAs are used. First, excluding open-shop contractors means fewer bidders, and fewer bidders result in higher costs. Second, with the construction industry in the midst of a labor shortage, it doesn't make sense to build a project on which a diverse, local workforce is a priority by excluding over 80% of workers, and an even higher percentage of workers of color.

ABC MA is the organization that fights on behalf of fundamental fairness when our members' rights are being violated. Our employees routinely work side-by-side with union members on projects bid without a project labor agreement, but we don't have that opportunity under a PLA. Our chapter has already sent a letter calling on the commission to reverse its PLA decision and begun making our case in Western Massachusetts media. It will always be ABC's mission to seek a level playing field. Healthy competition is one of the things that makes this county great.

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