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## Columbus Sq. Labor Fracas

### Cost-saving switch to 'open shop' draws fire from unions, Board 7

By Matt Joeseloff

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Rats and pigs are the newest tenants of the Columbus Square rental complex, along Columbus Avenue in the upper West 90s. The giant inflatable rodent, which at press time had been replaced with a cigar-smoking pig, are both the handiwork of local labor unions protesting the switch to non-union workers at the construction site. Co-developers the Chetrit Group and Stellar Management made the change at the beginning of July.

Because contractors use local labor when dealing with a union workforce, many of the hundreds of replaced workers were residents of West

Harlem and Upper Manhattan, said Andres Puerta, organizer for the New York District Council of Carpenters. Puerta added that the new workforce receives a quarter of the prevailing union wage—between \$20 and \$40 an hour—and no health care, pension and vacation time. He also complained that while developers said the move to non-union labor was necessary to reduce costs, none of the savings is being passed on to residents.

"This is a total money grab in the midst of a community that needs good wages and good benefits," Puerta said.

The developers, who characterized the new workforce as "open shop," rather than non-union, said the change was ultimately a cost decision.

"We decided to go open shop and choose the most qualified and fully licensed subcontractors at a cost effective price point. We met with several of the major trade unions in advance of our decision to go open shop to see if we could reach a project labor agreement which would make these projects economically viable. We were unable to reach a compromise that worked with the economics of the project in today's market," said Peter Rosenberg, development director at Stellar Management, in an emailed statement.

Asked how the cost savings would be passed down, Rosenberg said that the additional housing supply at Columbus Square would help relieve demand side pressure on housing, positively impacting area rents. However, the developers did not clarify how non-union labor would allow more housing to be built than a union workforce.

A spokesperson for the project, Talia Mann, said that the companies as a matter of policy do not disclose compensation paid to employees and subcontractors.

The developers and unions are not engaged in negotiations, and union members are currently picketing the site.



Union representatives surround a giant inflatable rat. photo by Andrew Schwartz

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"Since we commenced construction of Columbus Square in 2006, we have employed hundreds of union workers and logged nearly a million hours of union labor in the various the building trades. We have and continue to employ only the most qualified and fully licensed subcontractors," Rosenberg said in an email.

Helen Rosenthal, chair of Community Board 7, said she was concerned about safety because union laborers are often better trained than non-union workers. At press time, she was planning on proposing a resolution to the board's steering committee on Aug. 5, calling on the developers to hire back the union workers at prevailing wages and benefits.

"It's for the safety of the workers and the residents and anyone walking around that area," Rosenthal said.

The full board will vote on the resolution at its Sept. 8 meeting.

The Columbus Square development includes five luxury rental towers, running along Columbus Avenue from West 97th to 100th streets. According to spokesperson Mann, Columbus Village, as many residents know the development, was a name conceived by retail brokers to market the storefronts that are part of the project.

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*With additional reporting by Charlotte Eichna.*

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