

Jersey City Summit Conveniently Forgets about Workers and Worker Issues

I think the poet Maya Angelou said it best: “when people show you who they are, believe them.” It is in this spirit that I considered what to make of the massive influx to Jersey City of influential real estate developers, captains of finance, investors, general contractors, project owners, brokers, asset managers, and lawyers. Some 1,250 of them are expected to convene May 29th for the Jersey City Summit, a one day event that its organizers bill as the “Region’s Largest Real Estate Leadership Gatherings.”

I am in real estate leadership, too, except instead of billionaire investors, I represent workers as a member of the general executive board of the Laborers’ International Union of North America (LIUNA). We are the 550,000-member international union that proudly builds many of the buildings and much of the infrastructure that we use each day. Admittedly, I don’t have a Wharton or Harvard Business School degree hanging on my office walls, but I do have a framed newspaper clipping from the time I helped organize the New York City demolition market. Things were bad back then in the late 90s. Construction workers were being forced to work in terrible conditions for little pay and without regard for their safety, respect, or dignity.

Nearly three decades later, I wish I could say things were better for workers, but unfortunately all of the worker exploitation and developer greed that characterized New York City in the 90s has simply moved across the Hudson. The atrocious working conditions and underhanded business practices plaguing North Jersey construction isn’t a story of one-off incidents, by the way (as developers and their contractors will tell you). It is, instead, an insidious and pervasive business practice that has taken root in private development where undercutting vulnerable workers is seen as a shortcut to maximize company profits.

Jersey City, in particular, is experiencing an unprecedented building boom with high-end housing and massive mixed-use developments breaking ground all around. I’m sure if you attend the Summit you’ll hear all about the vibrancy of the Jersey City real estate market. You might even see a sizzle reel, pick up some glossy marketing materials, or chat it up with someone during one of the Summit’s several networking opportunities.

What I can practically guarantee you won’t hear about is the forced coercion construction workers—many immigrants or justice affected—face on the job site while building these impressive structures. These Summit attendees—the “Disruptors, Accelerators, Principals & Innovators” (their words)—won’t talk about the worker fatalities and injuries, the wage theft, the intimidation and threats, and the illegal practices that go on each and every day. In fact, a quick word search of the Jersey City Summit website will tell you all you need to know.

Word	Frequency
CEO	10

COO	15
President	25
Principal	34
Partner	92

Compare that to the word frequency of construction-related words.

Word	Frequency
Workers	0
Safety	0
OSHA	0
Union	0
Neighborhood	0
Local	0
Residents	0

“When people show you who they are, believe them.”

The prevailing message for the Jersey City Summit seems to be that the city is open for business. Real estate titans, developers extraordinaire, investors par excellence, and big time builders are racing to erect multi-million dollar buildings to capitalize on the historically hot real estate market. But, they seem intent on doing it at the expense of Jersey City workers, as evidenced by their continued refusal to even acknowledge the need for reforming their own industry and owning up to the business practices that are exploiting workers, cheating families, and destabilizing communities.

My invitation to speak at the Jersey City Summit must have gotten lost in the mail. Had I been given the chance to speak, however, I would have reminded the attendees that, once upon a time, there was a business model where developers and workers were successful together. Jersey City was building impressive structures, treating workers fairly, following the law, AND making real estate developers and professionals rich. I’ll gladly work with anyone on the development side who wants to return to that model again.

Is it possible to revive the old business model? Where we support and venerate a real estate development and construction industry that empowers the people who build Jersey City to actually afford to live in the city they’re building? I don’t know, but as long as the Jersey City Summit continues to “bring together Jersey City’s best and brightest,” the “visionary tri-state

leaders” for a “must-attend annual convening platform” WITHOUT including worker issues, the leaders who represent workers, or confronting the decaying industry standards that offer a competitive advantage to law breakers and cheats, I am not optimistic.

Regardless of what the Jersey City Summit and Jersey City developers decide, LIUNA will keep fighting for the workers, for fair standards, for more enforcement, and for stronger penalties for lawbreakers. No developer, contractor, or project owner should be surprised when LIUNA and its army of activists come banging on their door seeking justice. The simple fact these developers need to realize is that we are outside the door looking to knock it down because they refuse to let us in.

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