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Non-union, out-of-state workers building Marriott hotel on Kanawha Boulevard

by **Paul J. Nyden**
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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- A new hotel on Kanawha Boulevard is being built primarily by non-union, out-of-state workers, and the owner has been unresponsive when contacted by union contractors looking to bid on the project, according to local union officials.

Back in February, construction began on an upscale hotel facility, part of the Courtyard at Marriott chain, on Kanawha Boulevard near the intersection of the Elk and Kanawha Rivers.

Just half a mile away, the Ramada Inn, formerly the Charleston House Holiday Inn, is employing almost exclusively local, union workers as it renovates its entire building.

"Some of those guys at the Courtyard at Marriott are making only one-third of the money that our folks would be making," said Steve White, executive director of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation, an AFL-CIO affiliate.

Union construction workers make \$27 an hour or more, plus benefits, compared to \$9 an hour paid to some workers at the Courtyard at Marriott project, White said.

Terry Bevins is supervising the Marriott project for VIC of West Virginia, a Fayetteville-based contractor in charge of construction.

"This is all private money. This is not a state or federal project, like a bridge or a road," Bevins said. "We are not being partial or non-partial to union or to non-union workers. We are working to meet our budget."

Work began on the Courtyard at Marriott on February 28, Bevins said, and the new hotel will be completed a year from now. Bevins described it as a "higher-end hotel" and said it will have 120 rooms.

Today, the construction site has separate entrances for union and non-union contract workers.

The "Union Gate," on Virginia Street, is reserved for workers employed by: Brewer & Co. of WV, Berkel & Co., Essore & Co., Raynes & Co., Shindler Elevator Corp and WV Paving.

"All other persons are prohibited from using this entrance," the sign states.

The "Non-Union Gate" on Kanawha Boulevard is the entrance for workers employed by: Venture LLC, VIC of WV, McTech, Hi Tech Electric Inc., Cross Construction Co., Carpet Doctor, Mr. Roofer and Adams Tile and Stucco.

Jessica Stadd, a Marriott International spokeswoman in Bethesda, Md., said she could not comment on working conditions or wages at the Charleston construction site.

"As this is a franchise property, please reach out to the owning company, VIM Inc., who should best be able to help you," Stadd said Friday.

Charles H. Wendell, the owner of VIM Inc., which stands for Virginia Inn Management, could not be reached for comment. He did not return messages left at his offices in Fayetteville, W.Va., and in Charleston, S.C., on Friday and Saturday.

Wendell is also a director and "registered agent" for Charleston Hotel Venture LLC, one of the groups investing in the new Courtyard at Marriott.

M. Scott Brewer, who represents the Huntington local union in the Mid-Atlantic Regional Council of Carpenters, said he has repeatedly tried to reach Wendell.

"I tried to get a union contractor involved in bidding on the Courtyard at Marriott project," Brewer said. "But I could never get a return call.

"Local folks should have an opportunity to work. The vast majority of work on the Courtyard at Marriott has not begun yet."

Joe Samples, business manager for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 466 in Charleston, said he has also been unable to reach Wendell.

"Most contractors interested in working [on the Courtyard at Marriott] didn't get bid packages," Samples said.

Henry Neal, an organizer for the Laborers' District Council in Charleston, said that he tried to give VIC of WV a list of their workers who lay concrete foundation but was told that VIC already had their own workers.

VIC of WV hired some of its workers through WorkForce West Virginia, a state agency that helps unemployed workers.

"Most of these workers," Neal said, "get paid between \$9 and \$10 an hour, with a couple of them earning up to \$12 an hour."

Mike Matthews, business manager for the Charleston Building and Construction Trades Council, said, "If the Courtyard can take our law enforcement, fire protection and civil services paid by our taxes, they should hire our people at a livable wage."

The federal Davis-Bacon Act, passed in 1931, requires government construction projects to pay "prevailing wages" and open the bidding process to all companies that want to make a bid, but, as Bevins pointed out, it does not apply to private construction projects.

White, of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation, said it's good policy to open up projects to bidders, even if private companies are not required to do so.

"The owner has no obligation to let anyone bid, but that would just be good business," White said. "We compete all the time on private jobs. We make more money because we are more productive.

"Our guys can produce three times as much as many other workers. That is how we stay in business. We do private jobs all the time. We do work on banks, hospitals and office buildings."

White estimates VIC of WV will use union workers for between 10 percent and 15 percent of the work done by a couple of dozen different contractors at the Courtyard at Marriott.

"Jobs like site preparation, paving and installing sprinklers and elevators -- which are unionized -- will be done by local businesses, because they need to use heavy equipment at the site. VIC of WV really doesn't have any choice.

"But contractors doing electrical work, plumbing, heating, dry walling, roofing and painting are likely to come from other states," White said.

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