

# OBSERVER

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## At Labor Rally, New Measure Touted to Aggressively Boost Union Construction in NYC

By William Bredderman



Building and Construction Trades Council of New York President Gary LaBarbera, center, with union workers and politicians (Photo: Will Bredderman for Observer).

At a thousands-strong demonstration by building trades workers outside City Hall, Councilman Corey Johnson, a Manhattan Democrat, and Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer announced a new bill that would obligate all workers on buildings taller than 10 stories to go through state-approved apprenticeships—training programs administered almost exclusively through unions and unionized companies.

The blue collar powwow was an old-fashioned organized labor affair: whistles and picket signs, Bruce Springsteen and bagpipes blasting, a fiery speech by a Catholic priest who quoted Mother Jones. The one somber detail was a procession of men in black hardhats carrying coffins, symbolizing the—by their count—16 workers who have died on construction sites in 2015, all but two of whom they claimed were non-union.

Mr. Johnson suggested his new measure would prevent such fatal accidents.

“Enough is enough!” he yelled from the bandshell on Broadway, remembering his own Teamster father. “There has been enough inaction! There has been enough cutting corners! There has been enough death!”

“Union labor is safer! Union labor is better! Union labor is higher quality! Union labor pays better wages! Union labor does not exploit workers!” he continued.

Gary LaBarbera, president of the Building and Construction Trades Council of New York, praised Mr. Johnson for his “balls.” He attacked what he argued are unsafe and unfair conditions for workers on non-union jobs sites.

“The workers who have no voice are exploited every day,” he said. “They are paid low wages! They have no health care! They have no retirement security! They have no training!”

All apprenticeship opportunities in New York City currently listed on the state Department of Labor site are run either through a union local or through a company whose employees belong to a union.

Ms. Brewer emphasized the need for increasing protective regulations amid the city’s building boom.

“We have to raise safety standards and put in place measures that will ensure every worker on any sized building has safety equipment, proper training and proper quality supervision,” she said. “We have to set the bar higher.”

The bill is still being drafted and Ms. Brewer told the Observer that discussions with Mayor Bill de Blasio, who would have to sign off on any such measure, have not yet begun. When asked for comment, Mr. de Blasio’s office emphasized steps it had already taken to increase safety, including hiring more safety inspectors following complaints of insufficient oversight.

“We’ll review the legislation,” said spokesman Wiley Norvell. “There is no higher priority than protecting workers and the public. The recent increase in unsafe conditions worries us deeply.”

A source in the office Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, whose approval would also be necessary to the bill’s passage, signaled a similar receptiveness.

But Mr. de Blasio, with his heavy emphasis on maximizing construction of affordable housing, has so far resisted the push to increase the unionization rate on new building projects, having argued that such mandates would mean the creation of fewer below-market apartments.

A spokesman for the Real Estate Board of New York, which represents developers, asserted that the majority of on-site deaths occur at buildings shorter than 10 floors, meaning the bill would do little to prevent them.