

# Painting Boston Schools for a Fair Wage

By Mary Jo Connelly

In spring 2006, Community Labor United (CLU) won its first campaign: to get Boston Public Schools to change its contracting policies, and to hire local residents for high-wage union painting jobs and training opportunities.

The victory reclaimed \$2.5 million from non-union companies that had been painting Boston's schools using dubious business practices and underpaid workers from outside the city. CLU proposed and won an agreement to create a direct-hire program between the Painters and Allied Trades DC 35 for repainting Irving Middle School in Roslindale using 100 percent Boston resident journeyman painters and youth apprentices. With the support of a \$50,000 grant from the Boston Neighborhood Jobs Trust, apprentices were recruited, screened, and pre-trained by a network of community organizations, including Women in the Building Trades (WIBT) and YouthBuild Boston, with Sociedad Latina as lead. Throughout the summer, these organizations continued working with CLU and the Painter's Union to provide union and community mentorship to help each apprentice succeed on the job.

The CLU also won bid language on apprenticeship training that led to a union painter, the McDonald Company, winning and carrying out the \$1.7 million repainting of Madison Park High School in Roxbury. Although this job was not carried out entirely by Boston painters and apprentices, the McDonald Company did hire a number of Boston residents and apprentices from the CLU program. Both jobs came in on time, on budget, and with low apprentice turnover.

This program created a rare career opportunity for recent Boston high school graduates and GED recipients, who earned a starting wage of \$15.75 an hour, and will receive raises after every 750 hours of work completed, until reaching journey-level wages after

three years. (Journeymen painters working on the Irving and Madison Park Schools earned over \$31/hour.) Apprentices will also qualify for Painter's Union benefits: comprehensive family health insurance, a pension, and an annuity. In addition to on-the-job training, apprentices started twice-a-week classroom instruction in painting and allied trades that will continue for three years, as well as safety training that will continue throughout their painting careers.

## Partnership and Research, Keys to Success

The innovative partnership CLU created between the Painters and Allied Trades DC 35, the Boston Teacher's Union, and 12 diverse community organizations was a major factor in our victory. CLU's research also provided critical ammunition for the campaign, documenting that in past years only four percent of the public dollars spent to repaint Boston schools went to Boston residents. It also detailed wage, hour, and overtime abuses and very high contract profit margins on these jobs. This information, coupled with the power of the Labor Council and the broad Campaign Committee, got the partnership to the table with the Mayor's top leaders.

The campaign showed community members the positive role unions can play in their neighborhoods. It also demonstrated why unions matter in the workplace. "We still have to pressure the city to make awards to union contractors," says Jim Snow, director of organizing for the Painters Union, but "a lot of eyes have been opened among community organizations [that] didn't know that we have been quietly doing this kind of community-oriented work all along." ■

*Mary Jo Connelly is a researcher at Community Labor United in Boston, Massachusetts.*

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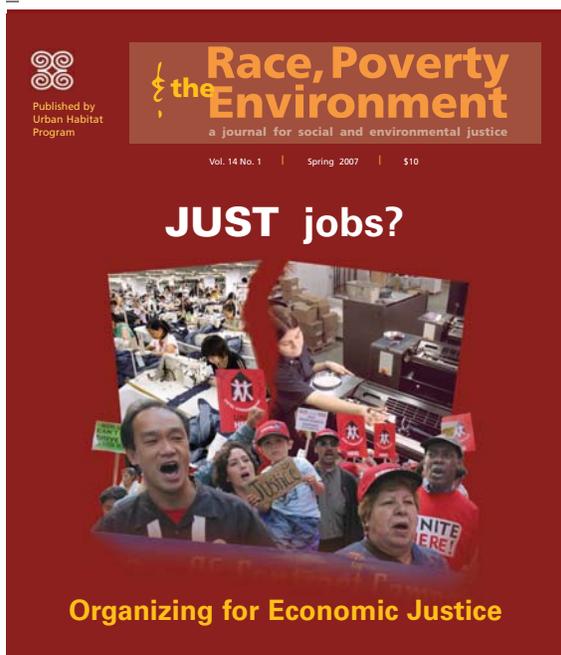
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