

GLOBE EDITORIAL

Public benefits don't justify labor deal on UMass project

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THERE IS much that state governments can do — and have done — to advance the status of workers, ensuring higher wages and access to health care. When labor unions are the sole vehicle for maintaining workers' dignity, a state might be justified in requiring that only union contractors be used on public projects.

But the project labor agreement enacted by the University of Massachusetts for \$750 million in expansion and renovations for UMass-Boston doesn't meet that test.

State law already guarantees that all workers on public projects be paid the "prevailing wage" — essentially, the union-negotiated wage — even if they aren't union members. The state also ensures access to affordable health care. So restricting all bids on the UMass project to firms willing to use union labor is less about protecting the workers than about catering to unions.

Already, the project labor agreement on UMass is drawing political fire, with Republican gubernatorial candidate Charlie Baker condemning the deal and Governor Patrick affirming his approval. Despite his admirable willingness to break with organized labor on education reform and the Boston firefighters contract, Patrick retains significant labor support. The UMass expansion is a significant bone to throw to politically powerful construction unions.

The non-political rationale for restricting bids to firms with union workers is that projects such as the UMass expansion require sophisticated work, and unionized workers tend to be more specialized. But it ought to be within the capability of project overseers to determine which firms are capable of doing the work without enforcing the broad-brush conclusion that union workers are superior.

It's impossible to say how much, if anything, the union requirement costs taxpayers because there are competing sources of cost and savings. Project labor agreements clearly limit the number of firms that can compete for work, at both the contracting and subcontracting level, and that deprives the project of potential low bidders. But defenders of such labor agreements tout the economic benefits of a smooth-running, on-time project, insisting that the pacts help maintain "labor peace" — a term with vaguely threatening intimations.

Maintaining labor standards is laudable. Restricting bids simply to promote unions, without a strong rationale for doing so, is not. Unfortunately, the UMass decision, and Patrick's support for it, seems more the latter than the former. ■