

OPINION

# A costly labor mandate for Madison Park High School?

Mayor Michelle Wu's push for a project labor agreement could sideline some of the construction workforce and add to the cost of the project.

By Jim Stergios Updated February 16, 2026, 3:00 a.m.

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Boston Mayor Michelle Wu's December announcement that she plans to use [a union-only project labor agreement](#) to build the new Madison Park Technical Vocational High School is cause for concern. The PLA would dramatically reduce competition by effectively preventing the [82.7 percent](#) of the Massachusetts construction workforce that chooses not to affiliate with a union from working on the project.

You don't need to be an economist to know that less competition means higher prices. A 2024 RAND Corporation [study](#) found that a PLA added 21 percent to construction costs for a housing project in Los Angeles. With Madison Park's \$700 million estimated price tag, that translates into over \$100 million in additional cost for Boston taxpayers.

When asked about the PLA, a spokesperson for the city wrote, "The City will pay workers the prevailing wage on the Madison Park project, like any other public construction project, as required by state law. By guaranteeing a steady supply of labor, the Project Labor Agreement helps to mitigate potential cost increases due to labor shortages or disputes."

It's hard to understand how excluding over 80 percent of the workforce will guarantee "a steady supply of labor."

One need not look very far back to see the impact of PLAs in Massachusetts. In 2024, the Springfield Water and Sewer Commission decided it would use one to build a \$325 million water filtration plant. As the project went out to bid, organizations representing nonunion contractors filed a lawsuit challenging the PLA.

In issuing an injunction to stop it, Hampden Superior Court Judge [Michael Callan](#) wrote, “The public benefits from an open, fair, competitive, and robust bidding process. The PLA requirement unnecessarily curtails that without legal justification.”

When the project was rebid without the PLA, the winning bid for electrical services alone was [\\$15 million less](#) than the one submitted under the PLA — a reduction of more than 35 percent.

The city’s Madison Park statement correctly notes that all employees on public projects — regardless of labor affiliation — earn the prevailing wage. PLA savings do not come from paying workers less.

Construction unions also argue that union work is of higher quality. But contractors must pass a state prequalification process to bid on public projects, and all trades workers in Massachusetts are subject to the same licensing, safety, and training requirements.

Perhaps the entities most harmed by PLAs are contractors of color and their employees — who remain overwhelmingly nonunion. In 2021, pro-union lawmakers had to set up a commission on participation by women and minority-owned firms — and bar bidders who had failed to hire enough such firms in the past — to secure a PLA on construction of a new Holyoke Soldiers’ Home.

During debate over the project, the Black Economic Council of Massachusetts wrote to legislative leaders arguing that PLAs usually require contractors to hire solely from union halls, where [“most Black construction workers and other workers of color do not belong.”](#)

Even pro-union elected officials are getting the message. In 2023, Governor Janet Mills of Maine, a Democrat, [vetoed legislation](#) that would have put PLAs on offshore wind projects, stating, “Most Maine workers in the construction industry — in fact, more than 90 percent — are not unionized. ... [T]his could stifle competition, which could cut out thousands of workers and employee-owned businesses.”

The following year, Governor Gavin Newsom of California, a Democrat, [vetoed a bill](#) that would have put a PLA on a group of state university projects, writing, “The new requirements proposed in this bill could result in additional cost pressures that were not accounted for in this year’s budget.”

When public officials require Boston taxpayers to unnecessarily come up with more than 100 million extra dollars to build a school, you can’t help but wonder whether their commitment to fiscal responsibility amounts to anything more than lip service.