

Jobs, Housing and Urban Development in Brooklyn: The Atlantic Yards Controversy

by Lee Zimmerman

In an interview in the previous issue of the *Regional Labor Review*, ACORN CEO Bertha Lewis addresses ACORN's relationship to Atlantic Yards (AY), a massive 22-acre high rise real estate project that developer Forest City Ratner (FCR) proposes to build in Prospect Heights, a low rise neighborhood in Brooklyn. Both her narrative and the explanatory endnote, briefly introducing the project, present extremely problematic accounts perpetuating those that have more or less dominated the public sphere. In this, they occlude the degree to which Atlantic Yards represents: an egregious violation of democratic process; the obliteration of vibrant communities through colossally scaled and instant gentrification; and continuing the radical redistribution of wealth upward that has accelerated in recent decades—a massive transfer of public wealth to a giant developer far in excess of any putative benefits. Some of these benefits include affordable housing and jobs. Given how seriously housing and jobs were needed even before the recent economic decline has exacerbated the problem, the rhetoric of “we're getting housing and jobs so AY is a good deal” has remained powerful, especially when mobilized by an accomplished leader like Berta Lewis, speaking for a group that has done so much for disenfranchised communities.

Such rhetoric, though, evades the point. The question isn't simply “will AY provide some jobs and affordable housing?” but rather “how much benefit, especially housing and jobs, will AY provide relative to the costs—the opportunity costs, of course—the housing that won't get built, the jobs that won't get created, the more appropriately scaled development that won't get built on the site, and the public services that won't get delivered, with the direct and indirect public subsidies that would go to AY, but also the costs to the environment and infrastructure, to public and fiscal health and security, to the urban fabric of Brooklyn neighborhoods, to the fight against the abusive use of eminent domain, and to the democratic process. That is, while Lewis acknowledges that FCR sought a Community Benefits Agreement to provide “political cover”⁹, her narrative fails to account for why that cover is needed. In an effort to suggest what is being “covered” by narratives like Lewis's, I'd like first to tease out the narrative implicit in her remarks and in the supplemental “informational” endnote, and then to sketch a counternarrative about Atlantic Yards.¹

Lewis begins by defining Atlantic Yards as “an example of what's going on across the country in urban environments, inner ring suburbs”⁸, and this initial characterization of the project as an “example” as an

undifferentiated member of a category is maintained throughout the interview. Although she calls the project “sexy, sexy, sexy,” she stresses that Atlantic Yards is the same as any other development.”⁹ The only difference she acknowledges, aside from sexiness, is that, unlike other developers in Brooklyn, Forest City Ratner was willing to talk to ACORN seriously about affordable housing, acknowledging and drawing on ACORN’s expertise in responding to its concerns. As one result of the failure to engage the project in its unprecedented specificity, Lewis presents herself as never having considered whether she ought to support it; accepting FCR’s imperial claim that resistance is futile, she defines the question not as “is this project worth our support and if not how can we use our significant and well-earned reputation to help resist it and encourage a more beneficial project at the rail yards?” but rather, in her words, “as in the majority of instances, [being unable to stop such a project], how do you in fact affect it?”⁸ But, as I’ll try to show, characterizing AY as “the same as any other development” drastically frames out the many aspects of the project that have prompted such serious opposition to it—precisely those aspects for which Lewis later concedes she has provided “political cover.”

That AY isn’t analogous to other projects, at least in terms of scale and density, is hinted at in the informational note that, appearing at the end of the interview, would seem to provide some context for Lewis’s

the major strands^v Forest City Ratner's Atlantic Yards Project was public

proposes to build within each income band. Based on some strands of information, though, it seems likely that nearly 4.1 of the

power of each group is used for the benefit of the coalition as a whole. In the AYJ case, several groups, all of which have publicly supported the project already, have each engaged in what seem to be separate negotiations on particular issues. Such a process, she concludes, can devolve into a mere publicity tool for developers of controversial projects. www_goodjobsny_org testimony bay ↓ .htm

