

# Boston's 'Big Dig': A PLA Disaster

## Problems With Costly Union-Only Tunnel Project Keep Getting Worse

On July 10, at least 12 tons of concrete fell from the ceiling of one of Boston's "Big Dig" tunnels, killing newlywed Milena Del Valle, of the city's Jamaica Plains neighborhood, and injuring her husband.

Even before this tragic event, the union-only "Big Dig," officially called the Central/Artery Tunnel Project, was widely recognized as a poorly constructed, extraordinarily expensive boondoggle.

The "Big Dig" tunnel, system was conceived in the 1970's to replace Boston's aging elevated six-lane Central Artery and improve access to Logan Airport and Boston Harbor. In 1987, Congress voted to furnish federal taxpayer funds, and ground was first broken in 1991.

To the dismay of independent construction employees and firms and Right to Work advocates, Massachusetts politicians announced that the "Big Dig" would be subject to a union-only "project labor agreement" (PLA).

Construction firm owners who wished to bid on the project, whether unionized or union-free, would be forced to impose restrictive union work rules on employees and to fill positions through discriminatory union hiring halls.

In 1991, project managers estimated the "Big Dig" would cost \$2.6 billion and take seven years to complete.

In 2001, President George W. Bush issued an executive order generally barring union-only PLA's in federal taxpayer-funded projects, but the order did not revoke PLA's such as the "Big Dig" that were already in effect.

### Many of Project's Problems 'Linked to Faulty Construction'

Thirteen years and nearly \$15 billion after ground was broken, the tunnel system was open, but still not complete.

Then, in November 2004, Boston media outlets reported that the "Big Dig" had experienced 1400 leaks in its tunnel wall as well as a wide array of other costly-to-repair damage.

In addition to suffering from inadequate planning, the project has been plagued by "problems linked to faulty



BOSTON GLOBE

**Boston's \$15 billion, union-only "Big Dig" has been a disaster. Last month, huge concrete panels were removed**

**from one tunnel after a section of its ceiling collapsed, killing one woman and injuring her husband.**

construction," as an AP news report noted last month.

For example, many of the leaks were apparently a result of subcontractors' failing to remove gravel and other debris before pouring concrete.

It also appears that tunnel ceiling bolts were attached with epoxy before it was properly cured and/or into improperly cleaned holes. The epoxy's manufacturer has suspected it was not mixed properly.

At press time, it is still not known whether the evidently low-quality work was responsible for the ceiling collapse in the "Big Dig's" I-90 connector tunnel and Mrs. Del Valle's death.

### Time For Congress to Codify Ban on Federal-Taxpayer-Funded PLA's

National Right to Work Committee President Mark Mix recalled that, just five years ago, a group of Massachusetts politicians, union-label Democrats and union boss-appeasing Republicans, praised the "Big Dig" PLA for supposedly promoting "labor harmony" and urged the Bush Administration to leave it in place.

"Now, no one can deny that the charges Right to Work advocates have long made against union-only PLA's are true in spades with regard to the 'Big Dig,'" said Mr. Mix.

"It suffered innumerable delays, many clearly occurring because shoddy work had to be done over again. It went way

over budget. And the final product is defective and dangerous.

"And, of course, the 'Big Dig' and other union-only PLA's are fundamentally wrong because they use taxpayer dollars to discriminate against nonunion construction employees and firms.

"While the 'Big Dig' is an especially egregious case of PLA abuses, excessive costs for taxpayers are the norm.

"For example, a study of New York State school-construction PLA's published this spring by the Beacon Hill Institute at Suffolk University in Boston found that on average they raise the base construction bids by 20%.

"The National Right to Work Committee and its members are committed to ending the abuse of federal, state and local taxpayer funds to bankroll PLA's.

"As a first step, the Committee is now calling for roll-call floor votes on at least one of two pending bills, H.R.1248 and H.R.1449, that would codify President Bush's 2001 executive order tightly restricting PLA's in federally-funded works."

In a recent letter to Capitol Hill supporting these measures, Mr. Mix expressed hope that Congress will learn from the "Big Dig" disaster, which it helped bankroll, and take action now to see that such a mistake never happens again.

"PLA's are deeply detrimental to the public interest," wrote Mr. Mix. "Congress should set a good example for the states by permanently banning federally-funded PLA's." 