

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Sunday Edition: Workers Allege Unfair Labor Practices On The DeChabert Demolition Project By RG Engineering

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Hiring concerns loom large and complaints of unfair labor practices grow on the DeChabert Demolition Project managed by RG Engineering of Puerto Rico.

Workers allege that U.S. Virgin Islands residents are being laid off and displaced while employees from off island are being hired in large numbers by the company. Workers also allege that of the locals that remain on the demolition project, employees from off island are given preference for overtime.

The demolition project will see RG Engineering removing all asbestos and lead from the buildings, which includes 45 residential structures, 264 apartments, one community building, a water tower and "other accessory structures associated with the site."

According to Jose Robles, the sales manager for RG Engineering, the project will include three phases and last approximately 270 days, with December 31, 2015, slated as the end date.

Phase I: The removal of asbestos and lead, including removal of insulation materials, floor vinyl tiles with black mastic (glue), window caulking, various door frames and more. During this process, there will be a complete sealing-off of the area, air-monitoring devices will be installed to assure that asbestos is contained, along with other protective implementations.

Phase II: Demolition of the structures, whereby water turbines will be installed throughout the site for dust control.

Phase III: Grading and hydroseeding the area.

Once all hazardous materials are collected, they will be quarantined and securely shipped to the U.S. to be disposed in an EPA-approved site.

While the project is mission critical, so too are the needs of U.S. Virgin Islands residents who are qualified and need jobs.

I know first-hand that the Talent exists in the U.S. Virgin Islands marketplace because in January 2010, 1000 qualified candidates attended Diageo USVI's Career Fair at the University of the Virgin Islands on St. Croix. Qualified Talent is out there. RG Engineering just needs to tap U.S. Virgin Islands residents and unleash their potential.

I interviewed several workers about the alleged unfair labor practices, two are on record, and the remainder fear that if they go on record, they will be blackballed by other companies in the future. I encouraged each worker to inform the Labor commissioner of the alleged unfair labor practices and inform the commissioner of Licensing and Consumer Affairs on the companies alleged not to be licensed in the U.S. Virgin Islands, yet sub-contracting their employees from off island to RG Engineering.

Mr. Gunnel Butcher was terminated from RG Engineering as a Laborer- Helper after two months and three weeks with the company, while other workers currently doing the same job were hired from off island after he was terminated and told that he was being fired for lack of work.

By trade and with certifications in his hand, Mr. Butcher is a welder, ironworker, boiler maker, and rigger. He worked at Hovensa for eight years and he worked at WAPA. He also worked at Nations Industrials as a sub-contractor when Diageo USVI was being built. Mr. Butcher also worked as a sub-contractor at Cruzan Rum and he paints as well. Incidentally, painters are allegedly being brought in from off island.

When asked about the alleged unfair labor practices, Mr. Butcher said, "I feel that we were hired to fit the labor laws to hire locals, but that was only part of RG Engineering's master plan to lay us off and hire their own people from off island when government

officials stopped checking to make sure locals were on the job in the numbers they agreed to. The Labor commissioner needs to investigate this unfairness. It's not fair and it's not right."

Mr. Nisbert Charlery, a Laborer-Helper at RG Engineering, who worked for the company for three months from the spring of 2015 into the summer and reported to his Foreman, Carlos Figueroa, said "RG Engineering took me and other people from St. Croix for a ride. I want to work. We want to work. Times are so hard. I want to work. Let us work."

Mr. Charlery was terminated by RG Engineering for lack of work. Yet the company is allegedly hiring workers from off island for the same work Mr. Charlery was doing.

As the former Director of Human Resources at Diageo USVI, I aligned human resources with the business vision to drive growth and managed the high volume full cycle recruitment of 80 US Virgin Islands residents to produce Captain Morgan Rum on St. Croix. And as an integral part of the design - build team for the Captain Morgan Visitors Center, I created a robust talent acquisition and operations strategy.

During my tenure at the distillery, I hired 97 percent U.S. Virgin Islands residents. In doing so, I surpassed the contractual mandate between the Government of the U.S. Virgin Islands and Diageo USVI to hire 80 percent residents.

I was passionate about the human resources service model which included the Talent Agenda, Total Rewards, Employee Relations, and Learning & Development. I was equally passionate about hiring U.S. Virgin Islands residents and pursued this goal doggedly. I encourage all employers who come to our shores, whether long or short term, to do the same.

While Diageo USVI is contracted on the island for thirty years versus RG Engineering's quick turnaround project, key elements of human resources remain the same. These best practices instituted at Diageo during my tenure may add value for new employers in the U.S. Virgin Islands:

- Held a career fair at the University of the Virgin Islands to recruit Talent
- Teamed with the University of the Virgin Islands on Learning & Development
- Analyzed 5 years of data to facilitate workforce planning which fed the talent acquisition strategy and succession planning process
- Held myself and the Diageo team accountable for hiring U.S. Virgin Islands residents
- Analyzed recruiting metrics and fed that data to Diageo's HR Leadership team
- Maximized the impact of compensation strategies
- Minimized cost per hire by leveraging the Department of Labor to fill open roles and to develop a robust talent pipeline for core positions
- Influenced Diageo leaders to play an active role in building the Diageo Brand in the U.S. Virgin Islands
- Instituted a Total Rewards Philosophy
- Instituted Health & Fitness Philosophy

Surely, several of the best practices may bode well for RG Engineering. Every employee in the U.S. Virgin Islands has a unique set of strengths. If we are truly passionate about

people, we know that if we grow them, we grow business. To do so, employers must provide an environment where residents can work, earn a fair wage, learn, develop, stretch, live and breathe and experience fair business practices every single day.

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