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Union is battling to ax WTC deal

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The city's largest municipal union is trying to stop a politically connected construction giant from getting the lucrative contract to clear the World Trade Center site.

District Council 37, a group of municipal unions representing 125,000 workers, argued yesterday that hiring The Bechtel Group makes no sense.

"We can do the job. We have been doing it very well," said Claude Fort, president of Local 375, whose members include the city engineers and architects who have managed the cleanup since Sept. 11.

"We have been working around the clock coordinating everything," Fort said. "We don't want Bechtel. We don't want any company to come in as project manager."

DC 37 will officially oppose the hiring of a private project manager today at a City Council Contract Committee hearing.

Mayor Giuliani did not return calls and has avoided comment about Bechtel, other than to say three weeks ago that no deal was imminent.

But the project manager pact, as an emergency contract, could be approved with only City Hall's approval.

If Bechtel receives a 2.75% management fee — the industry standard — to run the $1 billion cleanup, it will earn $27.5 million.

The potential lead role of the San Francisco-based company has been a contentious issue since Nov. 2, when City Hall officials told the four contractors removing debris at the site that Bechtel soon would be their boss. The company would fill the role being carried out by DC 37 engineers and architects with the city Design and Construction Department.

The four contractors and the unionized hardhats at the site fear that Bechtel could get rid of them, too. One contractor, Bovis Lend Lease, has submitted its own proposal to be project manager.

Bechtel has vowed to work with the contractors and use union labor.

If the company is hired, union workers argue, it will be because of its political connections. George Shultz, secretary of state in the Reagan administration, is a director of the company.

Bechtel has denied those claims.

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