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MTV show abandons Philadelphia

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Philadelphia proved a little too real for *The Real World*.

After squabbling with local unions, the producers of the MTV series yesterday gave up on Philadelphia as the site of its 15th season. Taping was to begin in three weeks.

"After considerable evaluation, we are disappointed to announce that Bunim/Murray Productions has decided not to shoot *The Real World* in Philadelphia," a spokeswoman for the company said yesterday afternoon. She declined to elaborate.

MTV's selection of Philadelphia was accompanied by unbridled civic rejoicing when it was announced Feb. 26. City leaders believed that *The Real World*, with its huge audience of 12-to-34-year-olds, would boost the city's cool factor and help it retain recent college graduates.

But within four days, Bunim/Murray had incurred the wrath of the unions by hiring a nonunion company to renovate the former Seamen's Church Institute in Old City, where the cast was to live.

The series had sidestepped organized labor in 13 previous cities, including union strongholds New York City, Chicago and Boston, without incident.

"Every other production company comes in, sits down and bargains," said Tony Frasco, vice president of Teamsters Local 107, whose members drive and unload vehicles. "The unions are not out to gouge anybody, but this is a union town."

It's a matter of "preserving the way of life in Philadelphia," said Pat Gillespie, business manager of the Philadelphia Building Trades Council.

Sharon Pinkenson, head of the Greater Philadelphia Film Office, worked years to bring *The Real World* to town. She said she had been aware that Bunim/Murray wanted to go nonunion.

"I recommended that they speak with other producers of nonunion reality television" who had worked here, Pinkenson said. She said work rules in reality TV tend to be looser.

Pinkenson said she did not know if Bunim/Murray sought the advice of those producers.

The MTV series' high profile may have heightened the unions' interest. When it came time to set up the building, next to the Betsy Ross House at Third and Arch Streets, Bunim/Murray hired a construction company that had been picketed by the carpenters at other job sites. That set off fireworks.

For two weeks, Teamsters, painters, carpenters and electricians picketed. A source close to the situation said Bunim/Murray was leery of striking a deal because it would set a precedent. The company also believed the unions might stage an on-camera protest during the four months of taping.

The pullout not only affects MTV, which was to debut *Real World Philadelphia* in September, but it could give a black eye to the city and its growing film and TV production industry.

Mayor Street disagreed. "I don't know it would be the end of the world," he said.

Bunim/Murray had planned to tape here through July. The company's spokeswoman said she did not know which city would replace Philadelphia.

The Real World broke ground for unscripted reality television when it debuted in 1992. Each season's seven cast members, ages 18 to 24, become household names as they are followed 24 hours a day, frolicking in hot tubs, hitting the bar scene and taking on nominal jobs. The show has been No. 1 in its time slot for seven consecutive seasons among 12-to-34-year-olds: That's four million viewers.

Meryl Levitz, head of the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corp., said last month that she expected *The Real World* to aid in her work with the Knowledge Industry Partnership, a college-student retention initiative.

If MTV chose a cast that "young people see as similar to them and presents Philadelphia as hip and desirable... you can't buy that kind of publicity," she said.

The pickets at the *Real World* building targeted Apple Construction of Holland, Bucks County. Bunim/Murray obtained from Common Pleas Court a preliminary injunction limiting the number of pickets at each entrance. And union leaders, including electricians union head John Dougherty, began talks with Bunim/Murray.

But the preparatory construction - which reportedly was about 70 percent completed - was only part of the unions' issue. The Teamsters demanded jobs once taping started.

Frasco, of the Teamsters, listed a number of locally shot TV and movie projects that have used union labor, including the CBS series *Hack* and *Cold Case*; the recent M. Night Shyamalan film *The Village*; and the forthcoming film *In Her Shoes*.

"If [Bunim/Murray chooses] to leave Philadelphia, that's their business," Frasco said. "It wasn't because of the unions. They'll just go to a town that will allow that."

The Real World's departure comes less than a year after the city, state and unions resolved a crippling labor controversy. At the Convention Center, union labor costs and ugly jurisdictional disputes chased away repeat business. New labor rules were negotiated last summer.

Since then, only one major trade show has booked a multi-day stay, the first in five years. The center is still trying to regain business from large professional associations. Many that came to Philadelphia from 1998 through 2000 did not return because of labor costs.

Philadelphia is the last bastion of union construction trades in a region that was a stronghold of union activity until the 1970s. Most construction in the Pennsylvania suburbs is done by nonunion workers.

Informed of Bunim/Murray's pullout, Jeff Zeh, president of the Southeast Pennsylvania chapter of Associated Builders & Contractors Inc., which represents nonunion contractors, said, "What else is new in Philadelphia?"

"You saw the list of the cities where they've produced their projects, and Philadelphia is the only one where they had a problem," he said. "It really is a sad commentary."

"We ask for fair wages and benefits, and [then they] make a fuss and take their ball and go home - what kind of real world do they represent?" said Gillespie, of the Building Trades Council. "We'll be called the Neanderthals and the pug uglies because of what we're trying to do."

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