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Philadelphia is part of the 'Real World' again

City officials resolved a dispute over unions with producers of the MTV reality show. Taping is due to start on schedule.

By Michael Klein
Inquirer Staff Writer

Yesterday's announced return of MTV's *The Real World* to Philadelphia capped a frenzied week of wooing by governmental and union officials.

Days of meetings, which started hours after the producers announced March 16 that they were leaving town, ended with what was diplomatically described as a "memorandum of understanding."

A statement from the Mayor's Office heralding the news made it clear that the accord was struck between producers and the city, and not between producers and unions, which had picketed an Old City building that was being renovated by nonunion workers to house the show.

Bunim/Murray Productions has not hired union workers in 13 *Real World* cities since 1992.

U.S. Rep. Robert Brady (D., Pa.) said that union subcontractors, including carpenters and electricians, would help finish the show's living space in the former Seamen's Church Institute at Third and Arch Streets. Teamsters also would get work, Brady said.

Construction was 70 percent completed when producers halted the work March 11.

The memorandum also addressed nonlabor issues, including provisions for a police patrol. A SEPTA bus stop will be moved 20 feet.

The producers had feared that unions would interfere with the show's 4 1/2-month taping.

Taping is due to begin April 10, on schedule.

The dispute, which drew international attention, began in February after Bunim/Murray hired Apple Construction Co., of Holland, Bucks County, and G. Caputo Co., of Glenside, Montgomery County, two nonunion general contractors.

The city's trade unions viewed the work as their turf, and not as a "set" that might fall under the jurisdiction of one union, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees Local 52. Although union workers are employed on many film and television projects in Philadelphia, set construction seldom involves other trade unions.

Young people and civic boosters rejoiced at Bunim/Murray's Feb. 26 announcement that it had selected Philadelphia for the show.

The Greater Philadelphia Film Office and the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corp. had been looking to showcase the city and had lobbied since 1999 to attract the show, which puts seven diverse young strangers in one house.

On March 1, four days after the MTV announcement, the carpenters' and painters' unions began picketing outside the building. That afternoon, John Dougherty, who heads Local 98 of the electricians' union, met the show's producer, Ted Kenney, at the Starbucks across the street. Dougherty - who became a point person in the talks - asked Kenney how he could work a deal.

Picketing continued. Bunim/Murray filed for a preliminary injunction in Common Pleas Court on March 9, a day after producers said pickets blocked the entrances.

Ashley Singer, a production assistant, said in an affidavit that when she arrived at the Third Street entrance at 7:45 a.m. March 8, men wearing signs from the carpenters' union were outside.

One "man physically forced me away from the door by pushing his body into my arm that was reached for the door," she said in her statement. She rang the doorbell and asked contractor Scott Caputo to open the door from the inside. "The man blocking the door looked at Scott Caputo and said I was not going to make it in today and said to Scott Caputo that, 'If you... try to come out here, you're not going to get back in either,'" she said.

The unions, while not admitting wrongdoing, did not oppose the injunction.

Producers decided that they could not be certain that they could tape unimpeded. They began packing up their offices March 12 and told contractors to remove their tools by March 14. That weekend, supervising producer Tracy Chaplin booked a trip to scout other cities,

including Austin, Texas, and Lake Tahoe.

Late March 16, Bunim/Murray issued a terse statement.

Inklings of the pullout spread through MTV's core demographic by the method of communication it grew up on: e-mail.

Two groups - the grassroots nonprofit Young Involved Philadelphia and the city-sponsored Campus Philly - flooded mailboxes with messages urging young people to attend a rally last Wednesday. Several dozen people showed up in the snow, bearing signs reading, "Show Philly to the Real World."

Last Wednesday, city officials began reaching out to Bunim/Murray in Van Nuys, Calif. On Thursday, Gov. Rendell phoned chief executive Joey Carson directly to apologize and asked him to reconsider. Street - widely credited as the deal maker - also spoke to Carson for a half hour.

Michael Yaron, the developer who owns the building, convened meetings in his Old City office Thursday and Friday that included Kenney, the Bunim/Murray line producer; Old City businessman Larry Cohen; and union leaders Dougherty, Pat Gillespie of the Building Trades Council, and Michael Barnes of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. Brady phoned in from Washington. Rendell called again Friday.

Street then summoned participants and City Controller Jonathan Sidel into City Hall for a round of meetings Friday and Monday. Meanwhile, Carson flew to Philadelphia. With an agreement at hand late Monday, Street led the participants to a friendly dinner at Cuba Libre, an Old City restaurant that Cohen partly owns.

Street had been optimistic since he talked to Carson Thursday night. "I got the feeling it could be resolved," he said last night. "I knew we had work to do, but I just got that good feeling."

Contact staff writer Michael Klein at 215 -854-5514 or mklein@phillynews.com.