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Posted on Sun, Jan. 6, 2008

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Tom Ferrick Jr. | Why the unions won't share

Data on their membership here show they are mainly white, male and suburban.

By Tom Ferrick Jr.
For The Inquirer

When Pat Gillespie appeared before City Council last month, he said he did not know the number of minority workers who were members of the city's building-trade unions - the electricians, plumbers, carpenters, glaziers and others who have a virtual monopoly on construction jobs in town.

This was odd because, if anyone should know, Pat Gillespie should.

He is president of the Philadelphia Building Trades Council, the umbrella group that is the public face of the unions.

But here was his reply when asked to provide a demographic breakdown of the unions' memberships: "I don't know who has the data or whether it exists."

Well, the data exist and I have them.

One look reveals why Gillespie was so shy about sharing information.

Despite 30 years of talking about getting minorities and women into these well-paid union jobs, the crafts remain all-male, nearly all-white, and the majority live in the suburbs.

Of the alphabet soup of unions that make up the building trades, only one - the Laborers Union - has a majority of minority members: 54 percent, according to the data I analyzed.

And - no surprise here - laborers are on the bottom rung of the trades, the lowest-paid jobs in an industry where skilled workers can make \$40 an hour.

Set the laborers aside and what picture emerges of the other unions and their members?

To summarize: 80 percent are white and 70 percent live outside the city.

That's a problem in a majority minority city. And it's a political problem for city officials who have given the unions a de facto monopoly over construction in Philadelphia. Meanwhile, the unions they have protected for so long do little to help city residents get good-paying jobs.

Now you know why City Council members and Mayor-elect Michael Nutter talk about "economic apartheid."

There are exceptions, but for too many unions, the civil-rights era in America is still just a rumor.

I did not get any data from the unions. When it comes to detailed information on race and gender, their doors remain locked. I went through a side window.

Any construction job that gets city, state or federal money is required to keep information on the race, sex and home addresses of union members.

These reports are filed with the city's Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD), which enforces federal guidelines that encourage the use of minority workers.

Acting on my Freedom of Information request, the OHCD handed over five years' worth of the data it had.

The data covered 73 projects - most of them large residential or commercial jobs - worth more than \$500 million combined and employing 10,480 workers, almost all of them union members.

I extracted the information on minorities and women from these OHCD files.

To be clear - this is a partial picture. OHCD does not keep data on the private construction projects that have gone up in the city the last five years; the Comcast Center and Cira Centre are two big examples. There is no requirement of minority hiring for these projects.

The \$500 million spent represents a relatively small slice of all money spent on new construction in the city between 2002 and 2007.

Also, OHCD pushes contractors who work on these government-subsidized projects to hire minorities. So the agency's data should show the unions in the best possible light.

Hmmm. Some light.



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To review the OHCD data:

The overall average of minority workers among all trades - including laborers - was 26 percent. Of the minority members, 68 percent lived within the city. Among white members, 30 percent lived in the city.

A handful of job categories beat or matched the 26 percent average, including cement masons (30 percent) and drywall finishers and tapers (26 percent).

The trades other than laborers that had the highest minority participation were electricians at 25 percent, and operating engineers at 24 percent.

A number of trades fell below the overall average of 26 percent minority participation. The list includes roofers (20 percent), carpenters (19), ironworkers (17), sheetmetal workers (15), bricklayers (14), plumbers (12) and steamfitters (5).

A note here: The data list workers by their trades, not by their unions, some of which have locals for each specialty. Hourly rates for workers vary depending on their craft and experience.

The OHCD data cannot tell us reliably whether pay disparities exist among blacks, Hispanics and whites. But here is one indicator: One of the best-paid jobs is foreman. Of the 113 men listed as foremen on these projects, 102 were white - 90 percent.

As to women in the crafts, fughedaboutit. Of the 10,478 workers listed in this data, 109 were women. A touch over 1 percent.

(I wonder if they have signs posted outside union halls - à la *Spanky and Our Gang* - saying, "No Girls Allowed!")

Gillespie was called before Council because some Council members wanted a slowdown over minority hiring at the city's next huge public project: the \$700 million expansion of the Convention Center.

The project will yield about 1,400 construction jobs. The original plan called for 13 percent to go to minorities.

Council members threatened to open the Convention Center project to nonunion workers unless the number was higher. The goal they set was 50 percent.

With the exception of small projects, using nonunion construction workers is taboo in Philadelphia. The unions' allies in the Democratic Party rigidly enforce Philly's status as a union-only town.

It sets up this dilemma for black and Hispanic workers: To get well-paying construction jobs, they must be union members. Yet, traditionally, the door to union membership has been closed. As Nutter said: economic apartheid.

I can also see the dilemma faced by unions' leaders. The membership that elected them is mostly white. The crafts have a strong tradition of "legacy" candidates - the OHCD list has lots of fathers and sons in the same craft. There is only so much work to go around. Do you open the doors wide to minorities, but end up with too many workers for too few jobs?

Because of these factors, the unions have been, um, incremental in their approach to integration.

Because they never share their data, we don't even know exactly how incremental.

Gillespie told me this week that the unions have had "inclusionary programs" for minorities since the 1980s. He pointed to a spate of recent minority recruitment by the Carpenters Union, the Cement Workers and the Electricians.

"There are a number of unions that still have to do things," he said. "And the Building Trades Council continues to encourage them to do it."

(A suggested motto for the council: *Now in our 30th year of encouraging them to do it!*)

To defuse the City Council threats over the Convention Center, he said, the building trades did agree to the 50 percent minority worker figure, as an "aspirational goal."

"I think our efforts are on the right track," Gillespie said.

My question to Gillespie was:

When are they going to reach the station?

Contact Tom Ferrick at tferrick@phillynews.com.

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Posted on Sun, Jan. 13, 2008

Tom Ferrick Jr.: Who exactly benefits from The Deal?

By Tom Ferrick Jr.
For The Inquirer

Let us call it The Deal.

When it comes to construction in Philadelphia, the market is dominated by the building-trades unions.

There are exceptions - mostly small jobs that fly under the radar - but if you want to build anything bigger, you must use union electricians, carpenters, steamfitters, sheet-metal workers, laborers and the other dozen-plus union crafts that specialize in construction.

There is no law that requires this.

In fact, when it comes to construction, Philadelphia is a closed-shop island in an open-shop sea.

Union workers are highly skilled, but they come at a premium: Their wages are anywhere from 10 percent to 30 percent higher than nonunion scale, and they have work rules (who can do what task on a site) that also add to the cost.

But if you were going to build a large, privately financed project - say, something along the lines of the Comcast Center - there is nothing to stop you from using nonunion workers.

Except for The Deal.

In reality, all hell would break loose if you went nonunion. There would be pickets who would shut down your site. And the city - and its political and legal apparatus - would back the unions.

The unions and the ruling Democratic Party have had a symbiotic relationship for decades. Construction unions are the biggest givers to the party. The party chairman is a member of the carpenters' union. Its most recent treasurer is head of the electricians' union. Virtually every city board or agency that regulates construction has union officials as members or chairmen.

So it was significant when City Council last month flirted with ending The Deal. The issue was the \$700 million Convention Center expansion. The flashpoint was minority hires. The construction plan called for 13 percent of the workers to be minorities.

Council wanted it at 50 percent. It threatened to open the project to nonunion workers to get there.

The backstory here is that the building-trades unions - despite nearly three decades of effort to the contrary - remain all-male and overwhelmingly white.

Data I have analyzed recently indicate that only one craft is majority black and Latino: the laborers, who are at the bottom rung of the pay scale.

Take the laborers out of the mix, and 99 percent of the craft members are male, 80 percent are white, and 70 percent live in the suburbs.

There was a lot of politics behind City Council's threat, but the policy question was really about the pie of construction jobs and how it is sliced.

And right now, most of the pie goes to white guys who live outside the city.

Hmmm.

So let's see. The Deal is: We give the unions a monopoly on nearly all construction work in Philadelphia, and the unions give us . . . what?

When I wrote about this issue last week, I got a lot of calls and e-mails from union guys who told me (in so many words) that the main reason there aren't more women and minorities in these jobs is that blacks are lazy and lack a good education and women are too weak.



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As one e-mailer put it: "I am tired of being the blame for the minorities' (mostly African Americans) lack of self-ambition to better their lives."

I don't know whether this point of view is widespread among union members. I hope not.

If it were true - that blacks and women are inherently incapable of doing these jobs - you would think there would be no skilled minority and women craftspeople. But that is not the case.

The truth is, there are a lot - but most are nonunion.

I looked at data, supplied by the Office of Housing and Community Development, on city construction projects in the last five years that went to nonunion workers. (OHCD says nonunion workers are allowed on residential projects with fewer than 12 units.)

Under federal regulations, OHCD must keep information on the home addresses, race and sex of workers who work on any government-subsidized project.

The union projects covered by the OHCD data totaled \$514 million and involved 10,748 workers.

The nonunion projects - understandably - added up to much less. They totaled \$39 million and involved 992 workers.

But the majority of workers in these nonunion projects were minorities: 72 percent, to be exact. And 71 percent lived in the city. Only 2 percent were women.

Council's threat did get the unions to agree to increase to 50 percent the number of unionized minority workers at the Convention Center project. Pat Gillespie, head of the unions' Building Trades Council, calls it an "aspirational goal." Whatever that means.

The big question remains: Who is benefiting from The Deal?

If the answer is "a bunch of white guys from the burbs who, in 25 years of looking, haven't found minorities to join their unions," a second question arises:

Why do we still have The Deal?

Contact Tom Ferrick at tferrick@phillynews.com.

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