

# JIM CROW: Alive and Well in the Building Trades

Vol. 3, No. 1

Jan. 1977

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The policy of excluding Black workers from craft unions is as old as the unions themselves. In earlier times the policy of Jim Crow was expressed openly in no uncertain terms. As the following delegate at the 1905 convention of the Railway Carmen put it: "I believe that God in his infinite mercy made the Negro but he never made him to be a car worker. I do not believe the time will ever come when he should come into a union along with carmen. I want to tell you I am a northern man, born of an abolitionist father, but when the time comes when I must sit down in social equality with the Negro, I want to be carried to the nearest insane asylum."

Today's craft leaders hide their racist policies behind phrases about equality and how their craft union is open to workers of all races, but the truth is that in the building trades, the largest, best paid and most powerful of the crafts, the percentage of Black membership has changed little in this century.

The racist stance of the leadership of the building trades unions is not just a matter of concern to construction workers. These aristocrats of labor dominate the leadership of the AFL-CIO (George Meany comes from their ranks) as well as many local central labor councils (here in Philadelphia Ed Toohey is a case in point.)

Indeed, the "pro-Rizzo" stance of the labor movement in Philadelphia is the result of the alliance of Rizzo forces with Magrann and the sell-out local leadership of the Philadelphia building trades. This leadership has historically worked closely with Rizzo in his racist attacks on Black and Spanish-speaking communities, while remaining silent on the Rizzo administrations raising of city wage and real estate taxes.

## POWER TO PICK AND CHOOSE

Unlike most industrial unions, the building trades have virtual power over who becomes a union member, and thereby power over who has the opportunity for employment. But rather than use this power to set an example of anti-discrimination for the labor movement, the building trades are unrivalled in having developed skills and techniques to thwart both legal and community pressure.

According to the unions, the road to full membership in the building trades is through an apprenticeship program. Admission requirements vary from local to local, but generally a local will have criteria stating age (18-30); education (high school diploma); and aptitude (pass an examination). The unions and the employers form a joint apprenticeship committee which supervises the apprenticeship program.

The joint apprenticeship program is handled by an apprentice coordinator who is usually a union member. This person meets with the applicants and provides them with information regarding the apprenticeship program.

The apprenticeship program basically consists of working in the trades while attending classes in the evenings. The program is from three to five years depending on the trade. Upon successful completion of the program the union membership has to make a final determination, basically by voting on whether or not the apprentice will be accepted into the union.

## RACIST BARRIERS

In practice, however, the major prerequisite for becoming a journeyman is blood ties. Since Blacks have been historically denied access to the trades, this procedure clearly perpetuates the discrimination. Also, the union uses terms like "good moral character" in order to maintain non-specific ways of keeping Blacks out of the union. These procedures, it should be noted, also have the effect of keeping out many potential white applicants, due to the vagueness of the requirements.

The unions tend to take a flexible attitude regarding the apprenticeship program. Family friends of union members are given various advantages and considerations regarding union membership. Yet Black applicants are told that they must be accepted into an apprenticeship program regardless of past experience. However, a 1964 U. S. Department of Labor study estimated that only 48.9% of construction workers nationwide had acquired their skills through apprenticeship programs.

When Blacks apply for the apprenticeship programs, they usually get discriminated against by administrative policy. A recent investigation of Locals 1 and 54 of Bricklayers, Masons and Plasterers gives a typical example of union tactics. In this case a Black applicant was awarded point totals differently than the white applicants. The Black person received an average of 17 points from three evaluators for his educational attainments (high school diploma

and some vocational training in bricklaying); whites with only a high school diploma received more points. The Black applicant was given an average of 8.3 points for his past experience, whereas several whites with less experience received much higher scores. The Black applicant was given an average of 2 points for his references; whites with no more relevant references were awarded higher points.

The racism of the building trades does not stop at the apprenticeship level. Indeed, it may even intensify for Blacks who become journeymen. The locals' major instrument for regulating the labor supply is the hiring hall.

## BLACKS DENIED USE OF HIRING HALL

The use of the hiring hall has been denied to Blacks by various means. The local union's business agent will explain procedures to whites while providing Blacks with no information or misinformation. Blacks are not told about eligibility for referral on the basis of the referral procedures established by local unions' collective bargaining agreements and by-laws.

Currently in an employment discrimination case being litigated against Local 542 Operating Engineers, some of the union's techniques have been revealed. In one instance Black workers were sent over 200 miles from Philadelphia for work when available work was in the city. In another instance, three Black union members were brutally assaulted at the union hall during a grievance proceeding.



In 1969, in response to protest of Black workers and the civil rights movement, the Nixon administration put forward the Philadelphia Plan as the solution to resolving employment discrimination in the building trades. The plan covered iron workers, plumbers and pipefitters, steamfitters, sheet metal workers, electrical workers, roofers and waterproofers, and elevator construction workers. The first plan required planning tables by the contractors which set forth the number of minority workers. However, the government set no standard regarding acceptable numbers. The plan was altered to state that all contractors working on federally assisted construction projects exceeding \$500,000 had to adhere to goals and timetables.

Another approach promulgated by the federal government was the hometown plan. These plans were voluntarily negotiated by all parties: labor, management, and representatives from the minority community. These hometown plans devised obligations that related directly to unions as well as contractors. Unions were required to accept minority employees as "trainees" and put them on a track that led to a journeyman's status. However, these workers were given "permits" and did not have the same rights as journeymen or apprentices.

#### PHILADELPHIA PLAN FAILS

Both the Philadelphia Plan and the hometown plan approach have been categorical failures. Under the Philadelphia Plan employees seldom made progress toward union status because employers could satisfy the plan by hiring non-union workers and minority workers were only used on jobs with federal contracts. It had no power over trades other than those enumerated above.

Also, the Office of Federal Contract Compliance, (OFCC), which was to enforce the Plan, has never aggressively

been able to make either labor or management comply. Similarly, the hometown plans were merely a buck-passing sham by labor and management. All hometown plans were voluntary and placed enforcement on the same parties, labor and management, whose history of racist practices had given rise to the need for the plans.

A survey of various locals in the Philadelphia area further illuminates the lack of progress in breaking down the racial barriers in the building trades. Except for the laborers' locals, which are the least skilled and lowest paid, there are no good examples, as the following will show:

	White	Black
Boilermakers	770	21
Electricians	1649	67
Ironworkers	846	9
Operating Engineers	4239	253
Plumbers	2451	28
Steamfitters	2873	62

The most successful attempt to integrate the building trades has been the struggle of the United Construction Workers Association (UCWA), a Black workers group in Seattle, Washington. They combined a Title VII lawsuit with massive job closures in Seattle to bring pressure on the unions and contractors. Five Seattle building trades, as a result of UCWA's struggle, went from less than five Black journeymen in 1969 to over 400 in 1976.

During the struggle in Seattle, the corrupt union leadership used thousands of dollars of workers dues to keep Black workers out of the union. They even established a temporary fund which workers were to pay into in order to fight the just demands of Black workers to join the union.

#### BLACK WORKERS FIGHT IN INTEREST OF ALL

As Black workers gained entrance into the unions in Seattle, they began to see that the rank and file were being misled by the sell-out leadership of the unions. They began to initiate and support struggles that benefitted all union members. One recent example was a strike initiated by Black electricians on a job site to support a strike of white operating engineers on the same site. This was done over the attempt of the leadership of the electricians' local to keep other trades from supporting the struggle. The Black workers have also been initiators of a struggle within the union bureaucracy to provide for rank and file control of the pension fund, to make the referral system fair to all workers, and to deal with safety concerns.

Struggles to break down the racial barriers in the building trades continue as can be seen by the recent events in Boston, New York, and the current court case against the operating engineers in Philadelphia. The tactics of the unions remain the same: use the union dues of its members to keep Black and other minority workers out of the unions.

Rank and file construction workers are currently under sharp attack. Cuts in government funded construction and the growth of non-union contractors like Altemose here in Philly have led to large scale unemployment in the trades. The only way out for construction workers is a policy of labor solidarity and militancy. White tradesmen have got to take up the fight to open up their crafts and end discrimination within them. The Seattle experience has shown that Blacks will support and initiate struggles as union members that benefit all workers. Only the contractors will gain if the unions continue to allow racism to divide the workers from each other and their real interests.

## WOMEN IN THE AUTO INDUSTRY A Long Way to Go to Equality

Vol. 2, No. 5

Oct.-Nov. 1976

As the 1976-77 contract approaches, the auto industry is just recovering from the severe layoffs of 1974-75. In many auto plants women workers were among the first to be laid off.

In the Fremont, California GM plant there were no women left on the assembly line. At the Linden, N. J. Cadillac plant, hundreds of women workers, re-

cently hired, were on indefinite layoff. Across the country, thousands of women autoworkers had lost their jobs. At General Motors, largest of the auto monopolies, the number of women workers

decreased from 96,882 in 1973 to 79,602 in 1975. 17,000 women, a majority of whom were blue collar workers, lost their jobs in a three year period.

In the early 1970's larger numbers of women were hired in auto as a result of federal legislation that was passed in the '60's, following in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement's demand for equal employment opportunity. Later, the growing Women's Movement also forced many industries and professions to hire women, where they had formerly been discriminated against. The trend toward