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## [A great opportunity to integrate the construction unions](#)

by *Harry C. Alford, NNPA columnist*



Harry Alford

One of the most curious situations going on in the political arena is the strong support construction unions get from Black elected officials and traditional civil rights organizations.

This blind and unconditional love affair going on even though construction unions are the most racist organizations in the nation defies all common sense. It is more than 44 years since the Civil Rights Act, and the construction trades are no better today than they were during the struggles of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Unions, per se, have been great and progressive, but the construction trades have hid behind the “skirt” of that legacy to prolong their exclusive and discriminatory ways.

The same unions that put out a “contract” on the life of Dr. Arthur A. Fletcher when he went around the nation implementing Executive Order 11246 [issued Sept. 24, 1965, the first "affirmative action" mandate, requiring equal opportunity employment by contractors on federally funded projects] and the Civil Rights Act are still resisting diversity.

That made it easy for us to convince President George W. Bush to prohibit Project Labor Agreements involving federal money. PLAs are agreements that prohibit any business other than a union shop from working on a specific project.

Show me a PLA and I will show you Jim Crow employment plus a locking out of most Black-owned firms that happen to be nonunion most of the time. A Project Labor Agreement is a license to discriminate against Black workers.

We showed President Bush that on the Wilson Bridge Project in the D.C. area, if we were to have a Project Labor Agreement like Maryland as opposed to Virginia, it would reduce Black labor by 70 percent. When the president banned any PLA on the bridge, he actually said, “I want to support small business and stop discrimination in the workplace.” That was a great moment for Black employment and business development.

With the new elections, the love affair between unions and the Democratic Party is about to emerge again. That is fine with me except with the bigoted construction unions.

I feel that instead of screaming and complaining, perhaps this is a great time to make a long overdue change. Let’s make the construction unions integrate.

President-elect Obama has promised groups like the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers that he will end the ban on PLAs. As he makes good on this promise, we must be vigilant and qualify each and every PLA. We must look at the demographic goals for each geographic area which are set by the U.S. Department of Labor and match that with the current capacity of the applicable construction unions.

In essence, if a major project is going up in Chicago or Detroit, we must see what the availability is for Black employment - laborer, journeyman, foreman, management etc. - in that market. If the construction unions do not have those numbers in their ranks, then we should file a complaint and stop the "set up" for discrimination. We have no other option.

Let's remember how the City of Detroit had less than a 10 percent Black workforce on their new baseball and football stadiums - the city is 83 percent Black! - because of a stupid PLA.

Sooner or later the discriminating union halls are going to get the message and start recruiting Blacks into their ranks once and for all.

**This is a great time to make a long overdue change. Construction unions are the most racist organizations in the nation. Let's make them integrate.**

When the Indiana Pacers needed their new stadium built, the construction unions demanded a PLA. The Indianapolis Republican Mayor Steve Goldsmith saw that he needed to do this to get funding from the Democratically controlled state legislature.

Black State Representative and Chair of the Budget Committee William Crawford displayed the wisdom of Solomon. Here was his deal: The state will put up the money but the PLA will provide that the Department of Labor standards [requiring the workforce to racially reflect the population] are met. Harry Alford would verify those numbers and report them.

The unions got their way, the mayor got his money and Black employment and contracting wouldn't suffer. However, it was indeed creative how the unions met those numbers. They didn't have enough local members to make them, so they recruited or brought in workers from as far away as Milwaukee, St. Louis, Cincinnati etc. to work on the project.

That was the only way they could do it. Also, there wasn't a Black in town working anywhere else but on the stadium. It was quite an experience that I cannot forget.

The pre-apprentice scams, the hush money to civil rights groups and political contributions will no longer work for the construction unions. They have got to integrate here and now. We are going to audit them and rank them market by market.

Anywhere a PLA pops up, the National Black Chamber of Commerce will be there to scrutinize, challenge and call out any discrimination. Eventually our leaders and the unions will realize that it is 2009 and doing the right thing is the only thing they can do.

Never again will we close our eyes, turn our backs or simply ignore institutional racism. We will fight and kill it. Yes we can!

*Harry Alford is the co-founder, president and CEO of the [National Black Chamber of Commerce](#).*



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## Economic Apartheid, Construction Unions and the City of Philadelphia



### Economic Apartheid, Construction Unions and the City of Philadelphia

The city leadership of Philadelphia, PA achieved a very precious milestone last year. After decades of blatant discrimination by 18 construction unions, the city council and the office of Mayor Michael A. Nutter (D) decided to deal with them and begin to make them change their ways. The battle began over the proposed \$700 million Convention Center Project which the citizens of Philadelphia will have to pay for via taxation. The city council demanded to know the racial and gender demographics of the unions as they sought a Project Labor Agreement (PLA) for the project. This means that only union contractors or contractors agreeing to work this project under the current union bargaining agreement and paying union scale wages to its workers can bid. PLA's greatly reduce the number of minorities, women and minority businesses working on a project.

Pat Gillespie, president of the Philadelphia Building Trades Council, irritated the city council who demanded the racial and gender data by claiming, "I don't know who has the data or whether it exists". This was an apparent bold face lie. All major cities track such data for major construction projects via compliance with Executive Order 11246 (John F. Kennedy, 1962). You can start looking for it through the US Department of Labor, Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP). In this case it was the Philadelphia Office of Housing and Community Development who kept the records. Investigative reporter Tom Ferrick Jr., writing for the Philadelphia Tribune, went and gathered the numbers and published them. It was shocking! Outside of general laborers, 80 percent of the workers were white males and 70 percent lived outside of the city (not even taxpayers who will pay for the projects). Non union projects had 72 percent minority employment and 71 percent lived in the city.

Seeing the data Mayor Nutter summarized it as "Economic Apartheid". His statement is correct and justifiable. This city has a minority population of 55 percent (46 percent is Black alone). Here is the breakdown of Philadelphia construction unions. Remember, "laborer" is the lowest paying level and it is here where they stuff the few minorities they have. The next token level is cement masons and as the pay level raises the minority representation decreases. The Philadelphia story: Laborers-54%, Cement Masons and Finishers-30%, Drywall Finishers and Tapers-26%, Electricians-25%, Painters and Paperhangers-25%, Operators and Operating Engineers-24%, Roofers-20%, Carpenters and Carpet Installers-19%, Floor Layers and Installers-17%, Crane Operators and Oilers-17%, Ironworkers-17%, Sheet Metal Workers-Bricklayers and Caulkers-14%, Plumbers and Plumbing Mechanics-12%, Plasterers-11%, Glaziers-11%, Sprinkler Workers-10%, Mechanics-7%, Seamfitters-5%, Elevator Workers-2%, Insulators-0, Tile Setters and Finishers-0.

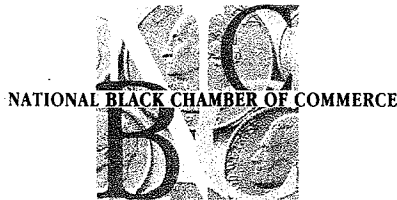
My friends the above data is despicable. It has been 47 years since Executive Order 11246 and 45 years since the Civil Rights Act. Plus that, there are 89,120 construction workers in metropolitan Philadelphia but only 10,478 are officially in the unions. Between 1997 and 2002, Black owned businesses grew by 43% which is the highest of any group in the nation. However, in Philadelphia they experienced a decrease of 10% for all Black owned businesses and a drastic decrease of 60% for Black owned construction firms with hired employees (US Census Bureau). It is Economic Apartheid indeed!

Mayor Nutter is taking action. He formed a commission, the Mayor's Advisory Commission on Construction Industry Diversity. It is made up of 15 reputable persons and will be firm. Its mission is to establish a five-year strategic plan for including minorities and women in the Philadelphia building trades. Meanwhile, the city council raised the minority hiring goals from 13% to 35%. The construction unions protested and some, like the electrical workers, claimed they would ignore the goals. That attitude didn't help. The City Council then rescinded the PLA. The unions came back contrite. In order to get the PLA back they have agreed to 50% of the workers to be Philadelphia residents, 25 percent are African American, 10 percent Hispanic American, 10 women, and 5 percent Asian. Sounds like a plan!

Any failure attaining the above numbers will result in the PLA being rescinded. The unions, in order to achieve these goals, will have to open their doors and begin hiring minorities at a history making rate. If they cheat on the numbers, people on the Mayor's Commission, like John Maclin, will definitely figure it out and sound the alarm. In Philadelphia, it has become "Unions, you will integrate or get gone – no PLA's if you don't".

The convention center has been on hold for over a year because of this issue. The strength and leadership of Mayor Nutter and the Philadelphia City Council is hereby noted and greatly appreciated. How is your city doing on diversity? Probably not as good as Philadelphia and I suggest you and other leaders get busy as you now have a model.

Mr. Alford is the co-founder, President/CEO, of the National Black Chamber of Commerce. Website: [www.nationalbcc.org](http://www.nationalbcc.org).



## PROJECT LABOR AGREEMENTS

### POLICY STATEMENT --

It is the policy of the National Black Chamber of Commerce, Inc. to oppose Project Labor Agreements. This opposition is based on the fact that African American workers are significantly underrepresented in all crafts of construction union shops. This problem has been persistent during the past decades and there appears to be no type of improvement coming within the next ten years.

There have been rouses of diversity pre-apprenticeship programs during the past twenty years but no increase in diversity at the apprenticeship to journeymen levels. The higher incidence of union labor in the construction industry, the lower African American employment will be realized. This is constant throughout the nation.

Also, and equally important, the higher use of union shops brings a correlated decrease in the amount of Black owned businesses being involved on a worksite.

Signed,



HARRY C. ALFORD  
President/CEO

January 26, 2001

**HOW UNION-ONLY LABOR AGREEMENTS ARE  
HARMING WOMEN- AND MINORITY-OWNED  
BUSINESSES**

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**HEARING**  
BEFORE THE  
**COMMITTEE ON SMALL BUSINESS**  
**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
ONE HUNDRED FIFTH CONGRESS  
SECOND SESSION

Washington, DC, August 6, 1998

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**POSITION PAPER**

**UNION – ONLY PROJECT LABOR AGREEMENTS**

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The National Black Chamber of Commerce, Inc. is firmly **against** union – only Project Labor Agreements. Such agreements result in anti-small business activity which is predatory to Black owned businesses and curtail the potential for employment opportunities within urban areas. No company or individual should be forced to sign a union agreement before given the opportunity to participate in our capitalistic system. PLAs are anti-free market, non-competitive and, most of all, discriminatory.

We base our position on the following:

- Labor unions, particularly the construction trades, have been under-representative of the African American population. Discrimination indeed exists in virtually every union hall across this nation. There are cases, such as Gary, IN, and Buffalo, NY where the unions have segregated chapters, i.e. Black carpenters union/white carpenters union.
- Unions have actively opposed programs that provide an inclusionary process for African Americans such as the Revised Philadelphia Plan and affirmative action programs at the government levels. Union money and influence played a major role in convincing the NAACP to either oppose and/or remain neutral on an affirmative action policy from the years 1969 –1990.
- 4 out of 5 American construction workers choose not to join a union. Union-only agreements would, therefore, oppose or usurp the public mandate.
- Union-only contracts increase the cost of construction through higher labor costs and limited competition. Many times they are found to violate competitive bidding laws and cost taxpayers unnecessary inflated prices.
- PLAs would render minimum wage standards invalid. Davis-Bacon standards would intercede and become the “actual minimum wage”.
- PLAs would cause a closed shop hiring practice with no guarantees of equal opportunity.
- Union-only contracts would “jack up” wage standards without proper negotiation and run up the cost of construction to prohibitive levels.

SIGNED:

  
HARRY C. ALFORD  
President & CEO