Why the unions won't share

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

When Pat Gillespie appeared before the 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 because, if anyone should know, Pat Gillespie should.

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

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

Well, the data exists 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 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 trade, the lowest-paid jobs in an industry where skilled workers can make $600 or more.

But here's the awkward side: a picture emerges of the other unions and their members.

To summarize: 87 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 minorities have protected for so long are being shut out because city residents get good-paying jobs.

Now you know why City Council members and Mayor-nominee Michael Nutter talk about "rescinding the santets."

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 demographic information on race and gender, their doors remain locked. I went through a side door.

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 Disparity and Community Development, which enforces federal guidelines that encourage the use of minority workers.

On my own initiative, I requested that the ODCD check its databases and Forward even with five years' worth of data, it did not have the data I needed.

The database covered 73 projects — most of them large residential or commercial jobs — worth more than $200 million combined and employing 16,800 workers almost all of them union members.

I asked ODCD for information on minorities and women from those ODCD files.

To be clear — this is an arithmetic picture. ODCD does not keep data on the private construction projects that have gone up in the city the last few years, the Comcast Center and the Ed Rendell Centre are two big examples. There is no requirement of minority hiring for these projects.

The $600 million spent by Comcast represents a relatively small slice of all the money spent on new construction in the city between 2002 and 2007.

The $800 million spent by Rendell Centre represents a relatively small slice of all the money spent on new construction in the city between 2002 and 2007.

The ODCD's pushback on these projects was not possible.

To review the ODCD 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 the members, 30 percent lived in the city.

* A large percentage of crafts categories beat or matched the 26 percent average, including plumbers (20 percent) and drywall finishers (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 (50 percent), carpenters (57 percent), electrical workers (30 percent), plasterers (17 percent), building contractors (20 percent), glaziers (12 percent), bricklayers (20 percent), machinists (12 percent), and painters (12 percent).

* A note here: The data lists workers by their trades, not by their race and gender, some of which have local ethnic specialties. Minority rates vary depending on their craft and experience.

The ODCD 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 foremen. Of the 115 men listed as foremen on these projects, 102 were white — 90 percent.

As to women in the crafts, forgetaboutit.

Of the 10,476 workers listed in this data, 169 were women. A touch over 1 percent.

I wonder if they have signs posted outside their jobs — "In Spandex and Our Gang" or something.

Gillespie was called before Council because Council members wanted a show-down on minority hiring at the city's largest public project: the $700 million expansion of the Convention Center.

The project will yield about 4,000 construction jobs. The original plan called for 15 percent to go to minorities.

Council members threatened to open the Convention Center expansion to private contractors, promising union members the job 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 enforce Philly's status as a "right to work" 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 also see the dilemma faced by unions' leaders. The membership that elected them is mostly white. The crafts have a strong tradition of "loyalty" candidates — the ODCD list has lots of fathers and sons in the same craft. There is only so much work to go around. So 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 1960s. He pointed to a spat of recent minority recruitment by the Carpenters Union, the Cement Workers and the Electricians Union.

"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: New in our 2009 year of encouraging them to do it.)

To define 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 tferry@philly.com.