

Perspectives

Why the unions won't share

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

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

To get good building jobs, minorities must be in unions. Yet, that door has rarely been open to them.

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 punishment-subsidized projects to hire minorities. So the agency's data should show the unions in the best possible light.

Hmmm. Some light.

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

Construction Trades in Philadelphia by Race

The balance between white and minority workers shifts significantly, depending on whether the job in question is a laborer position or a skilled position.

	White	Minority	Total	Minority percentage
Laborers	970	1,145	2,115	54%
Cement Masons and Finishers	173	73	246	30
Drywall Finishers and Tapers	106	36	144	26
Electricians	382	126	508	25
Painters and Paperhangers	184	60	244	25
Operators and Operating Engineers	334	105	439	24
Roofers	384	95	479	20
Carpenters and Carpet Installers	1,680	389	2,069	19
Floor Layers and Installers	90	19	109	17
Crane Operators or Oilers	38	8	46	17
Ironworkers	388	77	465	17
Sheetmetal Workers	270	48	318	15
Bricklayers and Caulkers	460	73	533	14
Plumbers and Plumbing Mechanics	394	56	450	12
Plasterers	87	11	98	11
Glaziers	103	13	116	11
Sprinkler workers	142	16	158	10
Mechanics	93	7	100	7
Steamfitters	122	7	129	5
Elevator Workers	46	1	47	12
Insulators	41	—	41	0
Tile Setters and Finishers	42	—	42	0
Total	1,776	2,702	10,478*	26%

* Totals exceed numbers listed because craft was not specified for all workers in the data. SOURCE: Inquirer analysis of data from the Office of Housing and Community Development (OHCD) of government-aided construction projects, 2002-2007

KEITA S. SULLIVAN / Inquirer Staff Artist

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 showdown 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?

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