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Job training, not PLAs, is what's needed for D.C.

Washington Business Journal - by [Roderic L. Woodson](#)

Project labor agreement (PLA) proponents are way behind the times. These advocates, almost exclusively trade union officials, constantly proclaim that PLAs are the only way for governments and businesses to efficiently undertake construction projects and lower "costs"; avoid labor stoppages ("strikes" to the rest of us); and provide decent pay and fringe benefits for workers. They also claim PLAs provide employment opportunities for local residents that would otherwise not be available. And, most of all, PLAs prevent workers from being exploited by "low wages." There is only one catch: For all of us (including governments, businesses or citizens) to enjoy any of these so-called "benefits," every worker on the job must join their unions.

So, what about "strikes" and "work stoppages"? When was the last time anyone in our region saw a single construction project halted because of a "strike"? It's been years and years. Why? Unions no longer control the labor market, and the absence of strikes has been a good thing for everyone involved — no interruption of pay for workers and lower construction costs for project owners, both government and private businesses.

And what about "pay and benefits"? The actual truth is that construction workers are all paid at the "prevailing wage" — unions and nonunions — and that's simply the law. Nonunion workers get generous fringe benefits from their construction company employers, including health coverage, life insurance and profit sharing. Trade unions have no advantage here whatsoever. Non-union employer companies learned long ago that a skilled workforce can only be hired and retained if the workers are treated well — and they are.

Local employment opportunities? Every company benefits from having a local workforce, especially construction companies. That is why so much effort is put into finding and helping to instill work-readiness skills for able D.C. residents by all business community sectors in D.C., not just construction companies. The business communities want, and need, local residents who are ready and able to work. The citation to the Nationals ballpark stadium project by the trade unions as proof that PLAs work is belied by the facts. The Washington Post reported on this in their article "Stadium Project Falling Short of City's Ambitious Hiring Goals" a few years ago.

Project costs? Let's get this straight. Nonunion workers on the work site take a team approach to their jobs — they do their own part and help others on the team when needed. Unions never do that because of self-imposed "work-rules" preventing cross-fertilization on the work site. That is where the cost differential always shows. If the field is even, union-only labor cannot compete with nonunion folks on the cost of construction.

So, why are PLAs so important to trade unions? The simple fact is that workers no longer need trade unions to do well, and workers know it. That is why trade union membership is so low in our region and nationally only about 15 percent. If the trade unions cannot get governments to impose the mandatory membership requirement contained in PLAs, trade unions would see their already dire financial situation worsen with the continued decline in membership and dues paying. Just one example: Union pension programs are woefully underfunded and face collapse without a substantial boost in membership and the related dues deductions collected by unions from worker wages.

What D.C. policymakers really need to focus upon are workforce development initiatives for our communities, like those outlined in the report "Closing the Gaps to Build the Future — Improving Workforce Development in the National Capital Region" from the Washington Council of Governments (January 2010), and not simply proposals for D.C. to impose trade union project labor agreements. In today's economy, trade unions and PLAs have become an anachronism whose time has already come — and gone.

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