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Sharing the Pie: The Boston Jobs Coalition

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Sharing the Pie: The Boston Jobs Coalition

Abstract

[Excerpt] To many it seemed that affirmative action in Boston's construction trades was dead. Instead, these events gave birth to the Boston Jobs Coalition and a struggle that established an unprecedented policy of local hiring requirements in the construction industry.

Keywords

Boston, Boston Jobs Coalition, Third World Jobs Clearing House, affirmative action, discrimination, race, ethnicity



Sharing the Pie

The Boston Jobs Coalition

■ *Chuck Turner*

On May 4, 1976, over 2,000 White union construction workers marched on Boston's City Hall demanding that the Third World Jobs Clearing House (TWJCH) be closed. These union workers maintained that TWJCH was providing support to Black, Asian, Latin and Native American workers who were picketing job sites throughout the city. Withdrawal of city funds, they argued, would stop these "illegal" demonstrations.

TWJCH had grown out of an alliance of the Black, Latin, Asian and Native American communities to strengthen their communities' share in Boston's construction industry. The alliance had demonstrated its strength by winning city funding for TWJCH as a resource for workers of color to implement the city's affirmative action plan. When unions and contractors boycotted the Clearing House, frustrating its goals, workers took to the streets to demand their fair share through direct action. Picketing and often shutting down construction sites around the city, the workers had begun to win a handful of jobs on some of the sites.

Two weeks after the demonstration by White workers, the

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Boston City Council voted 9 to 0 to cut TWJCH's funds. While Mayor Kevin White initially told his top Black aides that the funds would not be cut off since there was no evidence of a direct connection between the demonstrators and the Clearing House, seven months later, on the day before Thanksgiving, he signed the Council order revoking the funds.

To many it seemed that affirmative action in Boston's construction trades was dead. Instead, these events gave birth to the Boston Jobs Coalition and a struggle that established an unprecedented policy of local hiring requirements in the construction industry.

Search for New Allies

The attack on TWJCH had alleged that any action to support affirmative action for workers of color was an attack on the interests of White Boston construction workers. In fact, the unions, with the majority of their members living in the suburbs, seemed to close the doors on White Boston workers as well as workers of color.

As the advocates for integration of the trades assessed the situation, there seemed to be only one possible solution—an alliance between the communities of color and White communities in Boston. Such an alliance, it was theorized, could lead to a policy that would combine hiring requirements for workers of color and women with hiring requirements for Boston residents.

Such a policy, unheard of anywhere in the country then, seemed to be the only way to create a political force that could advance affirmative action for workers of color and women. Otherwise, the unions, in an era when the Boston economy was moving from manufacturing to service, would use the frustration of unemployed White Boston workers to politically block any movement to seriously integrate the trades.

The question of how to build such an alliance was complex since at that moment Boston was embroiled in continuous racial clashes over school integration and busing. In such a racially hostile atmosphere it seemed difficult to even develop a dialogue between White working-class communities and Boston's communities of color. However, there was one integrated neighborhood, Jamaica Plain, where there had been a recent history of Whites, Blacks and Latinos working together. While there was significant interest in working together to develop such a policy, there was also much skepticism about the possibilities of success.

Discussions continued about the possibilities, but nothing concrete happened until two lawyers from the Lawyers Guild's

labor committee in Boston agreed to research legal precedents. Their research revealed that in the 1930s the Massachusetts legislature had established a law that when public works money was spent, 75% of the jobs had to go to residents of the districts in which the work was taking place. They also brought to light a Supreme Court ruling that said the City of Chicago had the right to require that Chicago police be residents of Chicago.

It was clear that these precedents were a somewhat weak base to use for the development of such a groundbreaking policy. But they provided an argument in the neighborhoods that if we could build the political alliance, there would be a legal framework that the politicians could use for the policy.

With the legal precedents in place, the next question was how to build the political alliance. Given the hostile atmosphere in Boston's segregated White working-class neighborhoods, it seemed that the most likely organizations in those communities that might be interested in such an alliance were the community development corporations (CDCs). The CDCs' need for political alliances in order to generate resources for their community development work had led to the development of relationships with organizations throughout the Boston area. Also, without a policy that would require a certain percentage of city residents, CDCs might have significant difficulty getting residents of their own neighborhoods onto projects they were themselves developing.

The Boston Jobs Coalition

Assisted by an intern from one of the Jamaica Plain CDCs, leaders from the Third World Jobs Clearing House and from organizations in Jamaica Plain began to make contact with CDCs and other similar organizations throughout Boston. After a six-month effort, 40 organizations from eight neighborhoods had joined together to form the Boston Jobs Coalition (BJC).

Once formed, the BJC membership focused on developing a policy that would join affirmative action for workers of color and women with a residency policy. Their deliberations led to a position that on any construction project financed or assisted by the city:

- 50% of the total hours, trade by trade, should go to Boston workers;
- 25% of the total hours, trade by trade, should go to workers of color, regardless of residency; and
- 10% of the total hours, trade by trade, should go to women, regardless of race or residency.

The 50% figure for residency was chosen based on the concept that while Boston workers had a right to a significant share, there needed to be an opportunity for workers from other areas to share in Boston's construction industry. The hope was that the initiation of the policy in Boston would lead to the adoption of similar policies in other cities and towns of Massachusetts, as well as in the country as a whole, establishing the framework for a rational sharing of locally produced benefits.

25% was chosen as the figure for workers of color since that number represented the proportion of people of color in Boston's population. 10% for women was significantly below their percentage of the population of the city, but given the low number of women trained for construction, 10% seemed to be a number that would encourage significant growth in the female population in construction.

As the political discussion around this policy went forward, very few, even within the unions, argued against the merits of the policy. With residency coupled to affirmative action for workers of color and women, the policy was viewed as a fair way to cut the pie. However, city officials argued that despite the fairness of the policy, the political reality was that it was unlikely that Mayor White would be able to adopt a policy that was opposed by the suburban-controlled construction unions.

For approximately a year discussions went forward with union and city officials, and yet there was no agreement to put the policy into action. During the 1979 primary race for mayor, all the major candidates endorsed the policy except Mayor White. However, two weeks before the final elections, the Mayor unexpectedly announced that he would sign an executive order that would apply the policy to any project financed by the city or assisted through a 121-A tax agreement, which provided a 40-year property tax cap for downtown developments.

One of the significant political by-products of the development of the BJC and its policy initiative was that a Black candidate, Mel King, was able to campaign in every section of the city, even in previously hostile White neighborhoods, advocating an aggressive affirmative action policy in construction. The fact that the policy benefited all created a base of support that had never existed before.

However, once Mayor White issued the executive order, following his successful race for mayor, the unions and contractors joined forces to fight the issue in the courts. Their actions made it clear that sharing the job base with White Boston residents was as objectionable as sharing it with workers of color and women.

The unions and contractors argued against the policy in court as an unfair restraint of trade. However, in a 1982 decision Judge William Rhenquist, writing for the majority in a 7-2 decision, said "parochial favoritism" to help revitalize a city and improve opportunities for local poor, minorities and unemployed workers is not unconstitutional. Once approved by the courts, the Boston City Council unanimously passed an ordinance making affirmative action part of Boston's legal landscape.

After the Victory

One of the peculiar ironies of the struggle was the fact that while the policy emerged victorious from the court battle, the Coalition collapsed under the weight of internal racial tensions.

After the Mayor adopted the policy, the BJC obtained funds to hire staff to organize caucuses of White, Black, Latino, Asian and Native American workers. But disputes within the staff and organization quickly emerged around questions of how to organize the caucuses. Fears that the organization of a caucus of White workers would stimulate racism within the organization and frustration with the apparent unwillingness of many workers to join the struggle led to a policy battle that the organization was not strong enough to withstand. So by the time the Council had passed the ordinance, the Coalition had collapsed under the weight of internal tension.

The analysis that emerged after the smoke had cleared suggested that there has to continually be consciousness-raising in building coalitions that attempt major policy change, particularly those involving race. The conclusion was that there was too much focus on winning the policy battle and not enough time spent on helping prepare the members for the strains that would emerge in the attempt to build a multiracial workers organization.

By 1984 the absence of the BJC was acutely felt. Changes in tax laws removed the need for downtown developers to use the 121-A tax benefit. Consequently, during a major period of downtown development, advocates for the policy saw that private industry was no longer covered. Quickly reviving the remnants of the alliance, political pressure was focused on Mayor Ray Flynn, who replaced Mayor White in 1983. Flynn had been a staunch supporter of the policy when he was on the City Council.

Flynn's response to the pressure was to issue an executive order that extended the policy to all private construction over 100,000 square feet. This meant that all the new downtown commercial buildings would automatically be covered by the policy.

In 1986, as a response to pressure for a monitoring and enforcement mechanism for the private work, Mayor Flynn introduced an ordinance establishing the Boston Employment Commission—a seven-person body appointed by the mayor with the responsibility of reviewing all projects covered by the policy to determine their compliance. There also is a provision that requires that one-tenth of 1% of the total construction costs be put into a bond so that if the project is in noncompliance, funds are available to pay fines.

Is the policy working? Figures for the first half of fiscal 1988 show that on private construction projects, totalling \$1.3 billion, Boston residents got 29% of the hours worked; workers of color, 14%, and women, 3%. On public projects during the same period, totalling \$371 million, residents got 39%, workers of color, 25%, and women, 3%. Though these figures show gaps between the official requirements and the reality on the job, they represent a substantial improvement over 1980, when the plan was first implemented.

New Challenges

Without doubt, the residency policy has increased the share of work for Boston workers, workers of color and women. However, everyone acknowledges that at this point the key issue is not whether trained females, workers of color and Boston residents are being hired on Boston projects. The primary concern now is to achieve an agreement with the unions to train a sufficient number of workers of color, women and Boston residents to implement the policy. Since there is a shortage of workers necessary to meet the policy's goals, an agreement to fully integrate the unions' apprenticeship programs is essential.

Are we going to be able to develop such an agreement? It's unclear. It is clear that the unions are scrambling furiously to get public support for maintaining the state's prevailing wage law. Some of the unions have established preapprenticeship programs to assist Boston residents in qualifying for the apprenticeship programs. But whether the unions as a whole will negotiate a more far-reaching agreement regarding the apprenticeship program is questioned by many.

In the early spring of 1988, Bill Fletcher, head of the Community Task Force on Construction, which represents the interests of people of color in Boston's construction industry, met with several high-level union officials. Initial talks produced an agreement to begin discussions regarding expansion of the apprenticeship program as well as an agreement to have the unions provide

membership statistics showing the degree of integration of workers of color in the trades. The statistics were viewed by the community as an essential part of the process since, while the unions had produced some figures favorably comparing the integration of union apprenticeship programs with existing nonunion programs, they have never made full disclosure of the composition of their membership. However, in late summer 1988, the promised statistics had not been made available, and conversations regarding training had not gone forward.

While it is clear that there are significantly more workers of color now in the unions (even though the numbers cannot be fully documented) and that these workers and Boston workers are working in greater numbers on Boston projects, it is not clear how willing the unions are to open the apprenticeship programs in the ways necessary to meet the goals of the policy. While they want public help to protect the prevailing wage, many union officials still act as if the public should accept the apprenticeship programs as their private domains.

This problem is complicated by a second major problem—the unwillingness of Governor Michael Dukakis to apply the residency policy to \$14 billion of state construction work to be done in Boston over the next 10 years. The failure of the Governor to take that action makes it more difficult to get the unions to face up to their training responsibilities. If the Governor adopted the policy and made it clear that he was seriously going to enforce it, there would be additional leverage to get the unions to do the necessary training.

So, while there has been improvement in the relationship between the unions and Boston's communities of color over the last 20 years, it is not clear that the unions fully accept their need for cooperation despite their rhetoric and the presence of some new and apparently sincere leadership who are attempting to build bridges. To many of us, it is time for the unions to realize that if they want broad public support, then they must be publicly accountable, particularly in the operation of their apprenticeship programs. ■