

Date: 5/5/15

Submitted in Econ-Dev. Committee

Council File No: 14-1371, 14-1371-52

Item No.: 1

By: Communication from the Public

PolicyLink

PolicyLink.org Article on the Los Angeles Black Worker Center

Los Angeles: Black workers build power, reshape the construction industry

The \$2.4 billion Crenshaw/LAX light rail line under construction in Los Angeles is designed to connect neighborhoods — including the disinvested communities of color of South LA — to the airport, a major job center. But the project employed almost no Black workers until a determined group of Black trade unionists, activists, residents, scholars, and faith leaders campaigned to change that.

Now, nearly 20 percent of the 125 workers, including three women, are Black.

Much of the success is due to advocacy and monitoring by the four-year-old Black Worker Center. In a city where 54 percent of Black men ages 16-21 are jobless, and 30 percent of Black workers are in low-wage industries, the Center brings together workers and advocates to fight for increased access to high-quality employment.

"We work to contest the myth that Black men don't want to work, to resist the Black jobs crisis that is ravaging the social fabric of our community, and to create from the bottom up intentional strategies to deal with this crisis," said Lola Smallwood Cuevas, chair, Los Angeles Black Worker Center Coordinating Committee. "Workforce development alone is not the solution to the Black job crisis. We must build the leadership of Black workers and the power to move our vision forward."

The Center focuses on the construction industry, a source of well-paying union jobs that has largely shut out Blacks in Los Angeles, as in many other communities nationwide. The Center pushes for enforcement of civil rights laws, and its leaders are unafraid to call out racial barriers and biases that exclude people of color from pipelines to career-path employment.

"When we lift up the most vulnerable, which in our community is Black men and young Black men in particular, we will improve Los Angeles overall," said Smallwood Cuevas. "Jobs matter. When Black workers have done well, our communities have done well."

The Black Worker Center was part of a coalition that negotiated a historic project labor agreement with the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority in 2012. The five-year agreement requires that 40 percent of an estimated 23,000 transit construction jobs go to local residents from very low- to moderate-income neighborhoods, with 10 percent of those

jobs targeted at "disadvantaged workers" such as veterans, the long-term unemployed, and formerly incarcerated people. It is the nation's first master project labor agreement approved by a regional transportation agency.

The Black Worker Center quickly went to work to bring the early phase of the Crenshaw light rail project into compliance. The Center has developed a robust community monitoring tool, training volunteers in observational field work, data collection, site safety, and deploying teams to construction sites to systematically count workers by race and gender and monitor safety. The Center reports its findings to the public, quarterly.

The progress on Crenshaw is just the beginning. The Center has helped establish similar centers in the San Francisco Bay Area, Chicago, and Baltimore, and others are being planned through the National Black Worker Center Network. Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, some \$60 billion has been allocated for major infrastructure investments, said Loretta Stevens, co-Executive Director of the Center.

"That's a lot of jobs, that's a lot of public money, so how do we get to the table and be included? We're trying to make sure that we're not absent and that we're changing the structures, the institutionalized racism, and really challenging policymakers and politicians to speak up for diversity, stand up for fairness and equity for all."

The efforts profiled above, as well as many others, have been supported by national initiatives such as Communities Collaborating to Reconnect Youth and the Campaign for Black Male Achievement. To learn more, contact the Campaign.

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