

City's lack of diversity in building trades persists

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John Dent just wanted to work union construction in Philadelphia.

"There must've been seven, eight guys who jumped on me," Dent said. "They knocked me to the ground. Broke my glasses, and I just covered myself up as best I could. I got kicked. I got punched."

The June 1972 attack on a Black worker outside the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 542 was witnessed by police, who filed no charges, and documented in a federal anti-discrimination lawsuit that's still technically an open case in federal court, attorneys said.

Decades later, no one can point to data showing greater diversity across Philadelphia's many building trades unions, and some believe the problems plaguing the city's construction industry have actually gotten worse in recent years.

"In my experience — and I bid projects every day, all day long — I think it's gotten worse," said Emily Bittenbender, managing partner of Bittenbender Construction L.P.

"I'm the only women-owned GC [general contractor] in Philadelphia," Bittenbender said. "There's one African-American-owned. And, there was one, other Puerto Rican company that just went down. The recession and building boom have put a lot of minority- and women-owned companies under."

The [Philadelphia Building & Construction Trades Council](#) did not respond to multiple emails and phone calls seeking comment on efforts to diversify or to provide any records that would show just how many minorities or women make up of members of the building trades.

Reached by phone, trades council business manager John Dougherty declined comment.

There are more than 50 construction labor unions in the Greater Philadelphia region, and only one — the [Laborers District Council Local 332](#) — has predominantly Black membership.

Sam Staten Jr., the business manager for Laborers International Union of North America, did not respond to calls or emails seeking comment about diversity in the building trades in the city.

A Philadelphia Tribune analysis of available data collected by the U.S. Department of Labor and U.S. Census Bureau suggest the city lags behind many others with regard to minority-owned construction.

The Philadelphia metropolitan region was home to some 12,048 construction firms with employees in 2016, according to the latest available figures from the U.S. Census. Of those, an estimated 841 companies (6.9 percent) were minority-owned, according to federal estimates.

Based on government figures, you were three times more likely to find a minority-owned construction company in Denver or Oklahoma City. In Portland, 12 percent of construction firms with employees were minority-owned, according to government estimates from 2016.

Another detailed census of occupation by sex, race and ethnicity was conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2010; at that time, in Philadelphia, whites made up 80 percent of structural iron and steelworkers, 77 percent of sheet metal workers and 74 percent of carpet, floor, and tile installers and finishers.

Presented with those figures, Congressman Dwight Evans and Gov. Tom Wolf each proposed solutions to increase minority participation in the industry.

“I don’t think there’s one simple answer in terms of attacking this problem,” said Evans, who represents parts of north and west Philadelphia. “We need to do some bold and big things.”

Among them, more public schools need to prepare students for jobs in the building trades, Evans said. “Where government comes in is with building incentives and sweeteners to try and push the contractors and the unions and using the tax structure, like tax credits, to drive the aspect of diversity. The other part of this is the leadership of the unions being committed and understanding the importance of diversity and inclusion.”

Since Wolf took office, he said, Pennsylvania has increased its government contracting with “with small diverse businesses by 35 percent — up from \$240 million to \$330 million.”

“Moving forward, we plan to increase our spend with small diverse businesses from the current rate of 7 percent to 26.3 percent,” the governor said. “It is important that everyone in Pennsylvania has a shot at growing their skills and building a successful career.”

Back in Philadelphia, Mayor Jim Kenney and Council President Darrell Clarke point to the city’s Rebuild program and an oversight committee charged with monitoring diversity efforts by construction companies that get city contracts.

Funded by the soda tax, Rebuild puts millions of dollars toward construction at libraries, parks and playgrounds, Kenney said. The administration has set goals of giving 25% to 30% of funding to minority-owned businesses and 15% to 20% to women-owned businesses. So far, the administration is on track to meet those goals; minority-owned businesses will receive 27% of the funding, and women-owned businesses will receive 24%, [according to city officials](#).

“The difference between this and past programs is that if you’re working on this site as an apprentice or a journeyman... you can move that onto that next project that has nothing to

do with Rebuild,” Kenney said. “They’ll be on the bench, ready to be called for that next, non-city job. So, this is not a one and done.

But, efforts go beyond that, Kenney insisted.

“The building trades also have held boot camps, have plugged into the CTE (career and technical education) schools, are creating a pipeline of employees that are trained, after figuring out which trades they’re interested in and then getting them into the training programs that are going to move them in that direction,” the mayor continued. “We need to prepare them for the entrance tests and the apprenticeship program, allowing them to take the test many times a year as opposed to just once every few years.

“But people need to understand that we’re not going to have 2,000 new construction workers,” Kenney continued. “I don’t want to give you a number [of new jobs] because I don’t want to fall short of that number. But it’s not going to be massive employment.”

Instead, Rebuild will set the tone for future construction, Clarke said. “We anticipate with an agreement that was also struck with the unions as it relates to apprentices, goals and numbers, that this will set the template for what we need to do city wide — not just government-sponsored labor.”

By contrast, state Sen. Anthony Williams, D-8, was far less optimistic.

“We have lip service, but not much credible data to point to any changes,” said Williams, who is challenging Kenney for the Democratic mayoral nomination in the May primary. “We have a bunch of internships, but not many journeymen. How do you assess any situation without having accurate data? Anecdotally, you drive to a worksite today, and it doesn’t look any different today than it did before.”

Williams said it’s time for the city’s Asian, Black and Latino communities to demand more from their government and building trades.

“The reality is that, in Philadelphia, people of color are not the minorities. We keep getting second status on everything because everyone just accepts this notion that we’re the minorities,” Williams said. “And, we’re not. We’re the majority.”

Of course, this is not the first time officials have tried to address diversity in the building trades in Philadelphia.

In 1967, then-President Richard Nixon’s administration drafted The Philadelphia Plan to racially integrate the building trades unions in the city by establishing mandatory goals for nonwhite hiring on federal contracts. The plan was challenged and revised, and the revised plan was implemented in 1969.

The attack on Dent happened just a few years later.

In 2008, seeing still little diversity in the building trades unions, then-Mayor Michael Nutter formed an Advisory Commission on Construction Industry Diversity.

The commission was formed just months after a reported incident at the Comcast Center, then under construction. A Black hoist operator working on the site said a white worker had threatened him with a noose.

As the former president of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, A. Bruce Crawley sat on Nutter's commission.

To this day, Crawley believes the lack of diversity in the building trades is driving up poverty in Philadelphia.

"Right now, when you go to construction sites across the city, it's not very difficult to see the cars parked out front with the Delaware license plates and New Jersey license plates," Crawley said. "So, the people who live here can't get the jobs. The city skyline is booming. But, the people who live in the neighborhoods can't work there."

Bittenbender also was among the advisory panelists searching for solutions back in 2008. Then, as now, the city's economy was being held back because of problems in the construction industry, she said.

"The minority and women companies in this industry have never gotten ahead," she said. "I don't think the white man is keeping people down. But, I do think maybe it's the responsibility of the white man to help some of us succeed."

"We need to take this on as a city, and if we're really serious about this, then maybe we start a charter school," Bittenbender said. "We need to teach kids how to run construction companies. They have to see how it operates. They have to understand contracts, legal, accounting, financing, bonding, banking. They need to understand how to read a profit/loss statement."

At least two charter schools in the city are geared toward preparing students for the building trades — [YouthBuild Philadelphia Charter School](#) and [Philadelphia Electrical and Technology Charter School](#).

A third member of the panel was Walter Palmer, then the president and CEO of the General Building Contractors Association.

Palmer believes union laborers take too much of the blame for the lack of diversity in their industry. The real problem lies in an unfair system of government contracts and project financing, he said. "I don't think that the unionized community is at fault as much as people like to point fingers at them."

"I sat on union apprenticeship funds," Palmer said. "I sat on health and welfare funds. I sat on pension funds and for all the basic trades, and I think the more discriminatory groups that built systems for their own advantage were actually the elected officials and the contracting community. They built structures that were advantages to them.

"We've been working on this issue since issue since [Mayor] Bill Green, and you can't tell me that this is working," Palmer continued. "We live in the city of Philadelphia and we have a tremendous population and people who really need help and really need a job and really need training.

"And, the worst part of it all is that we're coming to the end of this fantastic construction boom in the city of Philadelphia, and my guess is you're not going to have more minority contractors in the city of Philadelphia," Palmer added. "You're going to have less."

Mark Stulb, president of L.F. Driscoll, said he's trying to move Philadelphia's construction industry in the opposite direction. L.F. Driscoll is currently building the Comcast Technology Center. It built the Comcast Center in 2008 and One Liberty Place in 1987.

With its Penn Assist program, L.F. Driscoll draws women and minorities from city high schools, Stulb said. Now in its third year, Stulb said, Penn Assist has provided training for more than 37 high school graduates.

In addition, L.F. Driscoll is mentoring "numerous emerging small companies" with ongoing work at the Comcast Technology Center.

"These companies under normal circumstances would not have been in a position to qualify for a project as large and complex as this one," Stulb said. "These companies now have the relevant experience to qualify for a wider range of projects throughout the city."

Days after he was attacked outside Local 542, Dent, now retired at age 76, said he went back to the union hall, looking for work.

And, he got work.

Often, Dent said he was the only Black man on the job, but never again did he experienced racism on the job.

"I was about the second or third Black operating engineer who got to operate the high crane," Dent said. "That's the highest paying job.

"Nobody ever put a noose or the word 'n-----' on my crane," he continued. "I never let them do that to me. The attack just put a fire in me. It sort of made me stronger."