

White-dominated construction unions want more diversity

By [Katie Johnston](#) Globe Staff April 22, 2018

In an attempt to get more young people of color to apply to its apprenticeship program, IBEW Local 103 advertised on the social media networks Pandora, Instagram, and Snapchat, and targeted the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan. The union, part of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, also splashed ads across neighborhood billboards and aired them during highly rated TV shows among people of color.

Many of the ads also featured, and targeted, women.

The result: Of 687 applicants from Boston, 452 are people of color, and 85 are women — the majority of them women of color — the highest number of minority and female applicants ever for a Boston construction apprentice program, according to Local 103.

Like many other construction unions, Local 103's 7,500 members are largely white men. The union covers Eastern Massachusetts but is based in Boston, where people of color make up the majority of the population.

“We strive to be as diverse as the city,” said business manager Lou Antonellis.

Efforts to diversify construction unions are taking place around the country, as the building trades workforce ages and more projects include goals to increase the number of women and people of color on work sites. The City of Boston recently raised [its diversity benchmarks](#) for public and large private developments: At least 51 percent of construction work-hours must go to city residents, 40 percent to people of color, and 12 percent to women — although many projects have [fallen far short](#) of these numbers.

Millennium Partners, which worked with Local 103 on its recruiting campaign, has failed to reach the city's diversity goals on previous developments but is committed to meeting them on its proposed \$1.3 billion Winthrop Tower, said principal Joe Larkin — and it's aiming to give at least \$120 million in contracts to women and minority-owned businesses.

Other local groups are also working to diversify the ranks of the building trades, which provide good jobs for people without college degrees. Compliance Mentor Group partners with schools, developers, and unions to get more women and people of color into construction; Building Pathways prepares low-income and disadvantaged residents to enter union apprenticeship programs.

Recruiting women has become a major focus for construction unions in recent years. Nationwide, [9 percent](#) of jobs in the construction field are held by women, but only 3 percent are in the trades, as opposed to administrative, sales, and other office positions.

In Massachusetts, women hold 7 percent of union trade jobs, double the share in 2012, according to PGTI: The Policy Group on Tradeswomen's Issues, a local collaborative working to increase that rate of women in construction to 20 percent. Non-union trades in the state are less than 3 percent women.

"This new generation of leadership in the building trades in Boston has demonstrated a serious commitment to getting more women into the trades," said PGTI research director Susan Moir, including the electrical workers, ironworkers, plumbers, operating engineers, elevator constructors, laborers, and sheet metal workers.

But, she noted, Local 103's effort will only be a success "when their next apprenticeship class has 20 percent women in it."

Construction has the smallest gender wage gap of any major industry, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, with women making [nearly 96 percent](#) of what men make, on average. Nationwide, women make around 80 percent. Most women in construction are in unions, where wages are based on negotiated agreements and are more equitable.

Latinos, many of them immigrants, make up almost a third of the nation's 10.7 million construction workers. But black workers account for just 6 percent, and Asians less than 2 percent. These numbers will probably grow as diversity recruitment efforts continue, but the key is to make sure these workers have career opportunities and aren't just being used to fill quotas on individual jobs, said Jennifer Little-Greer, executive director of the Minority Construction Council.

Union construction jobs offer a path to the middle class, with paid on-the-job training in apprenticeship programs and no student loan debt. Journeyman electricians who have completed a five-year apprenticeship make close to \$50 an hour at Local 103. Telecommunications technicians, who are also part of the union, make around \$38 an hour.

Local 103 recently appointed Kenell Broomstein as a business agent at the union, the first woman of color to assume such a leadership role at a major local construction union, according to Local 103. Broomstein came up through the ranks over 13 years in the union, starting as an apprentice. In the beginning, she was often the only woman, and the only person of color, on a job site. But Local 103's efforts to change that are making a difference, she said.

"It's allowing people to come in and to create an opportunity for them that they never knew existed," said Broomstein, who recently spoke at Local 103's third annual Girls in Trades conference to encourage young women to get into construction.

As part of its commitment to diversity, the union recently endorsed Ayanna Pressley, the first woman of color ever elected to the Boston City Council, who is challenging fellow Democrat Michael Capuano for his seat in Congress. Local 103, which supported Capuano in the past, was the first union to back Pressley, Antonellis said.

“People have criticized the trades for not being as diverse as they should be,” he said. “The same could be said about Congress.”

In all, more than 2,100 people from around the state applied for a Local 103 apprenticeship, and the union expects to pick up to 250 for its next class.

Of the 1,100 apprentices active in the union now, there are only 207 people of color, and 53 women.

Jeff Mcpherson, a 24-year-old African-American man raised by a single mother in Hyde Park, heard an ad for the apprenticeship program while he was listening to hip-hop and R&B on Pandora.

Mcpherson had already completed a one-year electrician training course at a trade school in Canton, and he passed the apprenticeship’s first hurdle, a mechanical aptitude test, with flying colors.

Now he just needs to ace the interview. If he’s chosen, he’ll be on his way to a comfortable middle-class life.

“I think it’s a great opportunity for people to get into a brotherhood, as they would call it here,” he said.