



PLAs Unfair to Minorities

UMass pact a gift to unions

By Robert Fortes | Wednesday, July 14, 2010 | Guest Column

With African-American executives in the White House and the State House, one might hope that this state and this nation would finally make some progress toward closing the gap between black and white unemployment.

In good times and bad, the unemployment rate for blacks has historically been twice as high as it is for whites, and current conditions are no exception. In May the unemployment rate for white males over 20 stood at 8.4 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, while the rate for the comparable black population was 17 percent.

When doctors take the Hippocratic Oath, they swear first to do no harm to their patients. But there is no similar oath for politicians, whose guiding rule seems to be self-preservation.

That instinct may explain why the politicians at the top of the Democratic tickets here and in Washington have chosen to support project labor agreements, even as protests by minority-owned contractors against these arrangements have multiplied across the nation.

A project labor agreement sets uniform terms between labor and contractors on a particular construction job - usually public - in exchange for labor harmony. While PLAs sometimes contain encouraging words about open competition, at bottom they represent a trade-off; in exchange for an all-union job site, employers are protected against work stoppages by a no-strike clause.

There are differences of opinion as to whether project labor agreements save money, but there is no groundswell of unemployed black men or minority contractors pushing to expand their use. On the contrary, the National Black Chamber of Commerce and minority contractors and laborers across the country have recently taken firm stands against them.

The Philadelphia chapter of the National Association of Minority Contractors objected last fall to a union-only PLA covering the \$400 million expansion of Graterford Prison. The result, wrote John Macklin, the group's president, was a virtual lockout of local minority-owned firms, since 98 percent of black-owned construction companies there are non-union.

In the District of Columbia, the publicly-funded Washington Nationals Park was built with a PLA that excluded 95 percent of minority-owned contractors. Promises that residents of the largely-black District would work half of all journeyman hours and fill all apprenticeships were broken at a cost in lost wages of \$12.32 million.

On June 14, with Gov. Deval Patrick and labor unions advocating for approval, a majority of the University of Massachusetts Building Authority board of directors voted to adopt a project labor agreement on a \$750 million, 10-year expansion of the UMass-Boston campus. As a believer in the free market, as former executive director of the State Office of Women- and Minority-Owned Businesses, and as an African-American, I voted against the PLA.

So if PLAs treat minorities so unfairly, why would Patrick and Obama be so eager to embrace them? Simply put, low-income black workers and minority contractors don't make the campaign contributions in cash and in kind that their higher-paid union counterparts do.