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Fletcher Sold On Jobs Plan

By ETHEL L. PAYNE

WASHINGTON — Arthur Fletcher has a tenacity which makes him refuse to run up the white flag of surrender on the controversial Philadelphia Plan and its counterparts in other cities, even though others have given it the last rites.

A little over a year ago, the Philadelphia Plan was announced by then Secretary of Labor George Shultz. It was an ambitious and bold move to open the door of opportunity for blacks and other minorities to enter the high-paying skilled positions in the construction industry.

Fletcher, who is Assistant Secretary of Labor for Wages and Labor Standards, was given a mandate to force the recalcitrant building trades unions, as well as the denizens of industry to not only comply with Executive Order 11246, but to meet established quotas for admitting minorities to apprenticeship and letting them move up to the journeymen ladder to full-scale wages.

Immediately, the plan ran into massive opposition from the construction unions, and less dramatized hostility on the part of industry. In-

deed, the traditional antagonists, management and labor, became "sweethearts" in their mutual detest of the Philadelphia Plan.

Meanwhile, though the Nixon Administration publicly supported the plan and backed Fletcher in his head-on attempts to enforce it, there was strong evidence that forces within were giving aid and comfort to the opposition.

The U. S. Civil Rights Commission in its report of April, 1969, noted that a large proportion of the biggest industrial employers are government contractors which have never had to take seriously the threat of sanctions. No contract had ever been terminated.

Not until May, 1969, did the Office of Federal Contract Compliance which is under Fletcher's supervision, move to debar five contractors from further government contracts. Court decisions enforced for the first time the requirements of the Executive Order and of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Commission concluded that there was a built-in resistance to enforcement in every

SEE PAGE 19

Fletcher Sold On Jobs Plan

Continued From Page 2

contracting agency within government and they were reluctant to upset the status quo. It said that business and government have enjoyed a comfortable relationship and that "vegetarism" is actually an excuse for inaction.

It was up against the wall in city after city for the Philadelphia Plan and its facsimiles. In Chicago, 4,000 blacks marched and clashed with construction workers. Gang members who had joined the crusade physically ousted white workers from their jobs.

When Fletcher and his chief aide, John Wilks who heads the Office of Federal Contract Compliance, held hearings in the Federal Court-house, mobs of white construction workers howled outside.

In Pittsburgh there were demonstrations and court suits. The same was true in Philadelphia. In Washington, the Black United Front, denounced the local plan and called for a new one which would require that 70 per cent of the skilled jobs on the proposed subway construction go to blacks.

Fletcher said philosophically, "The dilemma has been that the rebuilding of the American cities is happening right under the black man's nose. Here he is saying, 'I won the right to go to the hotel and I won the right to go to the school and I won the right to buy a house. Now I need the money.'"

Fletcher needs money in his battle. It is an old legislative device, developed to a science by southern lawmakers - resist to the last all civil rights measures and retreat strategically when the odds are overwhelming. The real crunch comes in effectively starving or crippling the agencies created to enforce the law by cutting appropriations to the bare bones.

The Office of Contract Compliance is woefully understaffed. Wilks has had to limp along with only 17 field representatives. Fletcher says he needs a staff of 150 to fully carry out the responsibility of OFCC.

Frustrated by indifference, hostility and resistance, Fletcher has zeroed in on one of the chief sources of the problems - the 13 government agencies that are the prime contract let-tees for industry. All told they spend approximately \$40 billion.

Fletcher has set up a compliance review system, with a monthly report on data regarding the firms receiving contracts.

The agencies affected are AID (Agency for International Development); Department of

Agriculture; Atomic Energy Commission; Commerce; Defense; General Services Administration; HEW; HUD; Interior; National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA); Post Office; Transportation; Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA); Treasury and VA (Veterans Administration).

He has not had too much success. There is a great deal of resentment at the move, even inside the Labor Department, itself. Fletcher tends to ignore this. In his plain-spoken way, he chastises Congress for not providing funds, the unions who don't want equal employment enforced, government officials for foot-dragging, and John Q. Public for not raising enough hell to get some action on Capitol Hill.

The press, especially the black media, has to do more, Fletcher insists. Marching and shouting may get some headlines or a TV shot, he says, but what counts are the letters, the phone calls and the visits to members of Congress, pressing the issue.

A lesser person than Fletcher may well have been out of government by now, but the tough-minded former football player doesn't scare easily. During the NAACP Convention in Cincinnati last July, Fletcher flew in to defend the Philadelphia Plan after Herbert Hill, the pugacious NAACP Labor Secretary, delivered a slashing attack upon it and the Nixon Administration.

The two men met before the TV cameras in what may have appeared to be mortal combat. The words flew hot and heavy, but afterwards they shook hands and Hill privately remarked, "I hope I helped Art out."

Fletcher's best support came from his former boss at the Labor Department, George

Schultz, who has moved over to the White House as the President's chief budget advisor. Schultz argues with Administration officials to get help for Fletcher and his operation, but even he is up against the formidable obstacles of George Meany and the powerful building trades union leaders. Nevertheless, Fletcher says he intends to hang in there and be optimistic that his policies will win.

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