

Labor Department Setting Up Unit to Spur Local Solutions to Construction Job Bias

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WASHINGTON — A special Labor Department task force is quietly being mobilized to spur development of "hometown solutions" to the problem of job discrimination in the construction industry.

The Office of Federal Contract Compliance has borrowed 30 staffers from three other Labor Department divisions to man the new task force being built around a regular field staff of 10 regional coordinators. Top compliance office officials say the task force is scheduled to begin moving into certain cities this week.

Insiders at the compliance office confidently predict that the task force will be able to produce voluntary construction industry equal employment opportunity plans in at least 19 cities by the end of the year.

Former Labor Secretary Shultz last February warned local contractors, unions and minority leaders in 18 target cities to speed development of voluntary area-wide plans or face the imposition of specific hiring goals by the compliance office.

The compliance office has imposed mandatory minority hiring plans on Federal contractors in Philadelphia and Washington in recent months. Officials had hoped that this "reflection of a determination to get results" would spur other areas to come up with a hometown solution.

But the progress has been slow, the insiders admit. Of the 18 target cities cited by Mr. Shultz last February, only Boston, Denver and Indianapolis have devised voluntary plans. Moreover, of six cities singled out for priority attention, only Boston has come up with a hometown solution.

Agreements in Two Cities

The remaining five priority cities are likely to be among those hit first by the task force. They are Detroit, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Seattle and Newark.

Labor Secretary Hodgson said last week that tentative agreements have been hammered out in two of the 18 cities—St. Louis and New Orleans—and are awaiting ratification by the contractors, unions and community groups involved. "Four other cities are currently in the process of negotiating construction agreements," he said.

Tentative agreements had been reached in Chicago and Pittsburgh before Mr. Shultz announced the target cities last February. The Pittsburgh plan, however, has since encountered a number of delays. Compliance office officials say privately they may have to step in at some point and impose a plan. Peoria, which isn't on Mr. Shultz' list, is the only other area that has come up with an acceptable voluntary

plan.

To speed the beginning of the task force, top Labor Department officials decided to lend the compliance office 30 staffers from the Manpower Administration, Labor-Management Services Administration and the Wage and Hour Administration. The compliance office is in the process of adding 17 persons to its staff, and has requested an additional 26 slots in the current fiscal year. But since recruiting and training the added staff will take some time, department officials decided to use borrowed help to get the task force off the ground faster.

Task force members will be briefed here this week in training sessions to be conducted by top compliance office officials. The sessions will stress the need to get all contractors and unions to participate in the voluntary agreements. To be acceptable, the hometown solutions must be area-wide agreements covering all construction work. The compliance office can impose specific minority hiring goals only on contractors doing work on Federally assisted projects.

Meany Approves Concept

Though AFL-CIO president George Meany and other union leaders have bitterly attacked the compliance office's controversial "Philadelphia Plan," they have repeatedly endorsed the idea of voluntary area-wide minority hiring schemes. Their reasoning is that minority hiring requirements that apply only to Federal contractors won't help increase the overall number of nonwhite building tradesmen in an area.

The attitude of local building trades union leaders is a key element in the development of a hometown solution, says Arthur Fletcher, Assistant Labor Secretary for Wage and Labor Standards. He says Government procurement procedures, in effect, give unions a veto over the use of Federal funds for the training programs built into most minority hiring plans.

"If the local labor unions don't sit down and agree that the training is needed there, then we can't use Federal funds to start a training program," Mr. Fletcher complains. "The hometown solution won't work as long as they have that prerogative and exercise it, unless there are some changes in attitude," he declares.

Compliance office officials insist that the new drive to produce hometown solutions doesn't mean the agency is going to be more willing to accept less stringent voluntary hiring plans.

A voluntary agreement reached in Buffalo and supported by Gov. Rockefeller, for example, still hasn't been accepted by the compliance office. And a proposed equal employment plan submitted by a group of New Jersey construction contractors also has failed to gain the agency's approval.