

Dramatic About-Face:Plumbers Suddenly Clear Way to High Pay
Jobs for Blacks -- May Slash Huge Welfare Rolls

By Victor Riesel

Washington, D.C.: -- Some union plumbers have begun fixing a leak through which some of our civilization has been oozing -- sometimes in blood, sometimes in gore, sometimes in smoke from riot-charred ruins of inner cities.

As usual, the leak-soldering has gone unnoticed except among a handful of observers who noted that the powerful, strategically placed AFL-CIO national plumbers union has agreed to turn 500 minority workers -- mostly blacks -- into \$7- and \$10-an-hour pipe handlers, steamfitters and technicians.

The story is not in the cracking of their white aristocratic union -- and who will say that in today's burgeoning suburban society a plumber is not an aristocrat (certainly not anyone who has needed one in a wet hurry).

The story is in the breakthrough in the apprenticeship system, the smashing of the age as well as the color barriers, and in the impact all this will have on the welfare system.

If other unions follow the plumbers, we may yet see millions voluntarily defecting from the nation's welfare rolls, now supporting some 10 million men, women and children.

We could well see today's black, Puerto Rican and Mexican-American ghettos assimilate as did the early century enclaves of Europeans who fled persecution, religious torture, poverty and pogroms.

All this on a pilot project involving (that's the latest in word) only 500 embryonic black plumbers? Yes, indeed.

It must first be noted that the agreement, signed by the plumbers, some 33 construction firms and the government, says there no longer is an age barrier to apprenticeship. The past rule limited apprentice eligibility to men between 18 and 26. The new pact says any man of any age can apply and, if fit, shall be enrolled.

Thus the hopeless "aging" black worker of 30 or 35 years of age, or 45 for that matter, now has a chance to get into the trade as a trainee for skilled craftsmanship. He gets his chance to earn enough to support a family instead of deserting it, so it can get its daily bread and rent from the relief and welfare agencies. The soldier, returning from the Vietnamese rice paddies; the black who couldn't make it or worked the streets as a wild kid and found himself suddenly too old at 27 to get into a skilled trade; the Negro who tried but found younger white men, sons and other blood relatives of old members (some of them in since the dues stamp was invented), all now may get their ticket to middle-class security if the newly signed pact works out.

It's Assistant Secretary of Labor Arthur Fletcher, a husky, politically sophisticated black ex-football player, now one of Richard Nixon's favorites, who says as much.

"This is the chance to give the black worker a chance to put decent clothing instead of burdens on the backs of his family," says Art Fletcher. "This gives him a chance to put food into their mouths and books into the hands of his kids. This is the golden opportunity for black workers to retrieve their manliness and family tradition."

In effect, this pact gives the men who have passed the apprenticeship age the opportunity to train as high-paid journeymen and qualify as full craftsmen in two years instead of the eternal five.

If this works, if this spreads to the other 17 craft unions, the 500 pioneers can grow into millions. There is no reason why tens of thousands cannot be trained as electricians, boilermakers, iron workers, painters, carpenters and even work their way into the all time nobility -- the elevator construction union.

There is great need for skilled men in the crafts now that everybody wants to be a doctor, counsellor and executive vice president and carry a dispatch case instead of a lunch box.

If it doesn't work voluntarily, President Nixon has geared his staff to go out and pressure all sides in the big cities -- Boston, Newark, St. Louis, Los Angeles to mention just a few metropolises.

The government is set to turn the Justice Dept. loose on 17 construction unions and contractors where the Labor Dept. finds a "pattern of practice" involving black workers. The Federals were ready to move into Chicago with this muscle recently. But then the unions sat down for direct negotiation with the black coalition.

Thus it will be one way or the other -- voluntarism or where needed -- compulsion. President Nixon's field marshal on this front is the soft-spoken, early rising assistant to the President, John Ehrlichman. The account executive in charge of whirlwinds is Art Fletcher. The thrust is from the late President Eisenhower's chairman of the Committee on Employment (circa 1955 to 1960) -- namely an old hand known as Richard Nixon.

It could work. It has some powerful sponsors -- a President and some plumbers.

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