

New Crack Down:Gov't. Quietly Launches Sharp National  
Drive to Open Craft Unions to Blacks

By Victor Riesel

Washington, D.C.: -- From Hollywood to Harlem the government is using trip-hammer pressure on unions, contractors, city and state officials -- on anyone who hires manpower -- to throw open the gates to black workers.

Pressure techniques are unique, extraordinary and imaginative depending on the "home town."

In the vanguard are the sotto voce Labor Secretary George Shultz; Attorney General John Mitchell's Civil Rights Division, and the administration's most angry man, big Art Fletcher, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Wage and Labor Standards. Mr. Fletcher is black and frank in his fury over what he considers discrimination against black workers by the nation's -- indeed, the world's -- highest paying industry, building and construction.

Of course the pay's good in Hollywood too. So virtually unnoticed, the Justice Dept. summoned leaders of the movie industry, television networks and craft unions to Washington on Oct. 27. The dialogue ran as it was never written in the studio think tanks. Justice Dept.'s Civil Rights officials did most of the talking. They told the screen and tube people that there was discriminatory hiring on both sides of the camera -- meaning the craft unions which control the movie labor market and the producers who fund America's canned entertainment.

That dialogue's still on. So is the pressure.

Further north, in Seattle, the government also got tough at the demand of Art Fletcher. He had been angered by demonstrations of white skilled craftsmen. He was furious over their massed protest to Governor Dan Evans over new black apprentice plans and by the walkout of white building and construction unionists when black trainees showed up on the job sites.

Mr. Fletcher then called on the Justice Dept. to probe the craft unions -- "not all"-- but certainly the plumbers and pipefitters, ironworkers, electricians sheet metal men and operating engineers.

Mr. Fletcher told the Justice Dept. that his own Office of Federal Contract Compliance was helpless to do more than dialogue and pressure. The Labor Dept. now is not even certain that Comptroller General Elmer B. Staats will pay contractors for work done under any agreement which brings in black workers unless the final contract meets the low bid and federal contract standards.

So Secretary Fletcher asked "Justice" to move in. It did. This threw it all into the courts under Title Seven of the Civil Rights Act. Two weeks ago the Justice Dept. filed suit against the unions in the western district of Washington seeking an injunction against alleged discriminatory practices. It could result in contempt of court action. It could cost the unions some of their treasuries or even nonrecognition. That's drastic. But that's what such black leaders as John Morsell, NAACP's assistant executive director, is demanding if tens of thousands of black workers are not absorbed by building and construction unions across the nation.

Meanwhile there's a restless truce in the other two crisis sectors -- Pittsburgh and Chicago.

On Oct. 29, Assistant Secretary of Labor William Usery Jr. called Pittsburgh craft union leaders and contractors' executives to Washington to ask them what they're planning. They came, loaded with manpower training plans. They're still talking, albeit long distance. In Chicago a seven man black and white, labor and management operations committee, with Mayor Richard Daley as the seventh man, is cooling it and developing hiring plans. The committee believes it has the answer -- but Secretary Shultz is not quite certain.

Neither is George Romney's Dept. of Housing and Urban Development. One of his assistant secretaries, not too long ago, wanted to hit some 17 contractors with tough economic sanctions -- meaning shifting the work from them to other companies.

Of course, there is deep resentment in AFL-CIO ranks. President George Meany believes that the building and construction trades unions are being made "whipping boys" by the administration.

Craft union chiefs bitterly report government disdain for their efforts. They point to the hiring of tens of thousands of new black workers -- and to efforts to train young hard-core applicants. They are angered by what they charge is national ignorance of the actual availability of young black men who want to go into construction. But most of all they talk of the injustice of charges of discrimination.

Behind all this is fear of being disemployed because of black newcomers. This fear was best articulated by Theodore Kheel, now one of the world's best-known mediators.

Ted Kheel points out that there is no seniority in the building and construction trades. When a craftsman is finished on one project and is through working for one employer, he must go back to the hiring hall and wait his place on line for another job. He has no rank over any one else. First come, first dispatched. He may have 25 years in the business. But if the chap in front of him has only a year, the first fellow gets the first open job.

Thus the newcomer is exactly even with the 25-year veteran plumber or electrician -- unlike the situation in manufacturing where there is a strict seniority system.

It's the lack of seniority and thus security which disturbs the building and construction workers and their union leaders.

And they are determined to fight for this security, say they.

Thus another confrontation is with us. The dialogue will be very, very loud.

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