



Local PLAs bite the hand feeding the beast

By Jim Waters

Prejudice at the lunch counter may have disappeared, but other types of discrimination remain alive and well in America – and have surprising supporters.

For example, President Barack Obama signed an [executive order](#) last year creating Project Labor Agreements (PLAs) on large public-construction projects.

Labor unions love PLAs. They impede non-union contractors by forcing them to change their entire approach to business – no matter how successful their operations – if they want to compete for PLA jobs.

PLA agreements often require non-union workers to join unions, be hired through union halls, pay union dues and they or their companies must donate to union pension funds — even though they will never benefit from such “contributions.”

“These are blatantly discriminatory rules against non-union shops,” wrote Michael Thompson, president of the Thomas Jefferson Institute for Public Policy.

The discrimination is widespread, since – according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics – 85 percent of construction workers don’t belong to a union.

Shouldn’t America’s first black president be especially sensitive about such unfairness?

The most famous PLA racket to date — uncoincidentally the most expensive highway project in America’s history — was Boston’s “Big Dig” project. It replaced Boston’s six-lane elevated Interstate 93 and included a tunnel under the harbor. The project, initially estimated at \$2.2 billion, ended up costing more than \$14 billion.

Kentucky’s local Big Labor lackeys, uh, I mean, “politicians” salivate at the chance to reduce competition for big ticket, local school-construction projects and steer the work toward their union pals.

Associated General Contractors of Kentucky [filed suit](#) after the Carter County school district signed a PLA with a union group for construction of a new \$10 million [Tygart Elementary School](#).

The association is defending its hundreds of member companies, which would get shut out of contracts before any bids were even accepted. It also sees as unfair the fact that some school-board members who voted to approve the deal with the Tri-State Building and Construction Trades Council are members of the 14 unions that form the council.

Can anyone say “conflict of interest?”

Perhaps the worst discrimination involves local companies.

When the Tygart project was first bid, JMK Electric Co. LLC in Grayson – which has worked on Carter County school projects for a quarter-century – offered a bid “more than \$200,000 lower than the lowest bid,” said Kelly Newland, who along with brother Bob Newland, owns JMK.

“We are Carter County residents,” said Kelly Newland. “We are property owners. Me and my family pay our taxes here.”

Yet if this PLA stands, his company gets shut out — unless it agrees to union scales.

The school board’s PLA vote “just knocked us off our feet,” Newland said. “I was so intimidated by the 50 or 60 union members that showed up with their (union agents).”

The civil rights movement was as much about eliminating such intimidation as it was ending discrimination. The two go hand in hand – in both the civil rights and the “labor rights” movements.

Do we really want policies that discriminate against local companies whose owners and employees pay taxes that support the school district that bids out the project?

Do we really want labor agreements that add millions to new school buildings just because a minority of the construction industry doesn’t want to compete?

Martin Luther King Jr. once dreamed his children would “live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

We’ve gotten rid of prejudice at the lunch counter. Now, let’s do the same in the workplace by judging workers based on their skills rather than their union status.

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