

# Building Power

## *The Los Angeles Black Worker Center Turns Excluded Workers into Forces for Change*

*Yelizavetta Kofman*

**I**N AUGUST OF 1963, 300,000 Americans, mostly Black, marched through Washington, DC to demand economic justice and civil rights. The country's Black population was struggling, relegated to second-class citizen status by economic and political repression. Fifty years later, economic injustice along racial lines persists. The Economic Policy Institute recently reported that Black unemployment is more than twice the rate of white unemployment—just as it was in 1963. The situation is particularly bad in Los Angeles, where the Black unemployment rate is a staggering 17 percent and 30 percent of Black workers earn less than \$12 an hour. Lack of quality employment has left Black communities without adequate health care access, fair credit options or decent public schools. The stalled progress of economic justice in Black communities and growing inequality throughout the country serve as forceful reminders that the need for worker-led social movement in America is great—a call the Los Angeles Black Worker Center (LA BWC) is striving to answer through a unique model of community-labor partnership.

The LA BWC began its work in 2008 by simply asking workers to tell their stories. “When we did, it was like opening the flood gates,” says Lola Smallwood-Cuevas, LA BWC’s founding director and a former union organizer. Over months of meetings, hearings, and town halls, workers discussed the lack of quality jobs available in Los Angeles’ Black communities. As

one worker explained, “if you look at Jordan Downs and Nickerson Gardens [two housing projects in Watts, Los Angeles], you will find there is no employment in a five mile radius.” In a sprawling city like Los Angeles, that means workers have to make a long and expensive commute on low wages.

Story after story told of unfair treatment on the job. Laborer Will Harris (*all worker names are pseudonyms*), a father of five and a union member, talked about being laid off a week before Christmas, despite his exceptional dedication to his job and 20-years of construction experience. Another union member, Eric Stevens, discussed how he hasn’t held a steady job for a full year since becoming a sheet metal journeyman more than a decade ago.

Overall, workers provided a sobering assessment of their needs: access to quality jobs, protection from discrimination and training. The LA BWC’s goal became to address these needs, through political education as well as job training. As Rev. Kelvin Sauls said at an early meeting: “We have a lot of workers today who don’t know our history in civil rights and labor rights, which go hand in hand. We need to teach our history, particularly the proud history of the Civil Rights Movement and the need to contribute to that tradition.” Members and staff were confident that implementing worker-led solutions would lead to tremendous changes for workers and communities in Los Angeles

As a first step in securing jobs for Black workers, the LA BWC decided to initially focus on the public construction sector. Unionized construction jobs offer an attainable career ladder that has not been outsourced, unlike the long-term trend in blue-



**Yelizavetta Kofman** is a doctoral candidate in Sociology at the University of California Los Angeles and a research assistant at the LA BWC.

collar manufacturing. In fact, as the LA BWC was getting off the ground, policy makers were allocating billions of taxpayer dollars for construction projects as an answer to the nationwide recession.

In 2010, then-Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa proposed a “30/10” plan that would accomplish 30 years’ worth of transit projects in just 10 years and create 160,000 new jobs, partly by securing federal loans. The first project to break ground would be the Crenshaw/LAX Transit Corridor, a light rail line running through the heart of South Los Angeles. Finally, good jobs were coming to predominantly Black neighborhoods. The LA BWC was determined that local residents would have access to them.

**Pipelines and Politics:  
A Model for Industry-level Change in LA**

Black workers remain chronically underrepresented in construction, despite decades of Black worker activism for inclusion. In recent years, the City of Los Angeles recognized the need to address diversity deficits in the construction sector. Officials worked with local unions and community organizations to expand access to apprenticeship programs. However, impressive gains in completion of apprenticeship programs by Black workers—which jumped 39% between 1999 and 2007—have

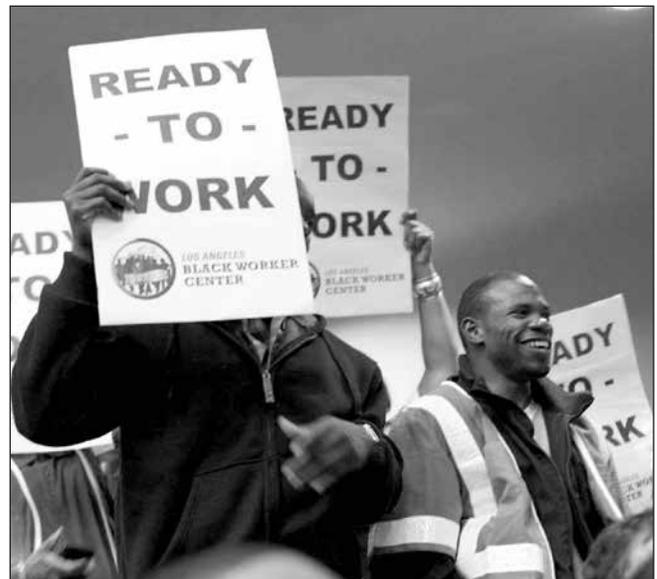
not translated proportionally to gains in Black employment in unionized construction careers. On the job sites, where it counts, Black workers remain on the sidelines.

The LA BWC resolved that the 30/10 Metro projects would be different. They recognized that a major opportunity to achieve change was through a Project Labor Agreement (PLA), which Metro was already considering implementing. Under a PLA, ground rules are established on wages, work site conditions and protocol for resolving labor disputes on public works projects; the owner of the project (Metro, in this case), the unions and the contractors all agree to be bound by the agreement so that the project runs smoothly. Some PLAs, including the proposed Metro PLA, also include the community as a stakeholder in the project, expanding the agreement to include workforce goals such as increasing access to jobs for local residents and disadvantaged workers. The proposed Metro PLA built on years of policy work by the County Federation of Labor, the LA/Orange County Building Trades Council and organizations like the Los Angeles Alliance for A New Economy (LAANE). LA BWC members and staff lobbied elected representatives and the Metro Board of Directors to pass a master PLA for the 30/10 plan.

On January 26, 2012, the Metro Board unanimously approved the PLA. Dozens of LA BWC members wearing hardhats were there to cheer the decision.



LA BWC member Andre speaks out at Metro public comment meeting in support of strengthening the PLA.



LA BWC members take action at a Metro meeting.

Though a major victory, the LA BWC knew that the PLA alone would not solve the issues of access and retention for Black workers. First, in a city like Los Angeles, properly defining “targeted” community residents is crucial. A two-mile radius can include such a wide expanse of people that the spirit of the agreement—to reach residents of directly impacted and disadvantaged neighborhoods—is easily sidestepped. A UCLA Labor Center analysis of nine Los Angeles projects with local hire provisions, for example, found that while the 30 percent local hire requirements were met or exceeded, only about 5 percent came from the zip code area in which the project was actually being constructed. Another limitation is that these policies do not directly address the underrepresentation of Black workers in construction. In California, Proposition 209, which bars preferential treatment on the basis of race in public contracting and employment, limits the available tools policy makers have to address inequities.

“The PLA is a really great launching point toward greater access,” says Smallwood-Cuevas. “Our role is to figure out how to strengthen the PLA and how to reach the most excluded communities.”

To meet these challenges, the LA BWC mobilized its resources: relationships with labor leaders and a community hungry for change. After many meetings and actions by LA BWC members, Metro agreed to modify the PLA to include stronger language in support of diversity, stronger research-based disadvantaged worker criteria and federal civil rights and equal opportunity language.

The next step was ensuring enforcement of the PLA. The community wanted a robust system of oversight and it wanted to be part of the solution. Working with graduate students at USC, the LA BWC developed a community monitoring tool—a report card that graded contractors based on their past performance on compliance with civil rights and labor laws, commitment to community relationships, transparency and commitment to diversity. LA BWC members were trained to contact contractors, talk to construction workers on job sites and conduct research on contractors’ previous projects. The LA BWC presented their findings in meetings with contractors and Metro.

The community’s efforts paid off. Art Leahy, Metro’s

CEO, came to the LA BWC to meet with members and shared his commitment to an equitable workforce; he committed to meeting with the LA BWC quarterly to review the PLA goals and progress. LA BWC members also met with Walsh Shea, the contractor awarded the Crenshaw/LAX Transit Corridor project. After hearing the community’s concerns, Walsh Shea agreed to work with the LA BWC to make sure their subcontractors, foremen and superintendents understand the PLA and the community’s expectations of the project. “The workers have been diligent, persistent, unwavering, completely clear and transparent about why this is so important,” says Smallwood-Cuevas. “And I think that courage has been recognized—people are responding to that.”

While city officials and employers are crucial, the most important long-term partner in bringing Black workers back into the public construction sector is the building trades. The LA BWC is working with allies at IBEW Local 11, SMART Local 105, UA Local 250, the African American Council of Union Ironworkers, the Painters and Allied Trades District Council 36 and others to build support for long-term training and leadership development of Black workers. As a first step, the LA BWC developed a Black Leaders in Green (BLING) institute, which introduces workers to the building trades and does orientations in the community. The LA BWC also put together a mentorship program where union construction workers who have successfully taken the apprenticeship entrance exams provide tutoring every Saturday.

The labor-community partnership is not always an easy one, says Smallwood-Cuevas. “There was a lot of resentment in the community about unions. A lot of workers asked, ‘Why do we want to have union construction? Unions don’t open up to our community.’ We also had former union members tell us they didn’t feel supported by their unions and dropped out or were unjustly let go.”

But slowly initial union partnerships are developing into long-term relationships. Recently, the Presidents of SMART Local 105 and IBEW Local 11 recommended the LA BWC for a Labor Innovation in the Twenty-First Century (LIFT) grant, stating in a joint statement that they “see the LA BWC as an important ally in local efforts to organize across



LA BWC members and community participate in a building trades orientation.

race and industry to build power and participation of LA-area workers.” The LA BWC is hopeful many more unions will follow with their support.

### **Future Challenges: Resources, Power-sharing and Scale**

In just a few years, the LA BWC has grown from a few members to a fully-fledged organization with four full-time staff members, over 650 participating members and contacts with 2,500 community members and workers. The challenge now is to make sure they have the resources to continue their work and to bring their vision of labor-community partnership to scale.

To do that, the LA BWC is convinced that the labor movement must open up to worker centers. “Unfortunately, the majority of working people are not in a union. So a majority of the potential power base is unemployed and underemployed,” notes Smallwood-Cuevas. “We have to think of new ways to harness that power. It’s not that community has all the answers. We simply believe that there are opportunities for us to expand the conversation and the consciousness of workers.”

One way for labor to tap worker strength is through unions’ tremendous training resources, what

Smallwood-Cuevas fears has become an “Ivory Tower” of worker education because so few workers have access to a union. Another challenge is showing that unions are open to African American leadership at the very top of union organizations, where currently the numbers are scarce. The LA BWC has been successful in developing union members into community leaders, who are then even stronger leaders in their union—a community-labor leadership feedback loop that has enormous potential.

Drawing on the success of their efforts in the public construction industry, the LA BWC is looking to expand to other industries where Black workers make up a large segment of the labor force and there is opportunity to improve job quality, such as the health care industry in the wake of the Affordable Care Act and the retail industry, the fastest growing employer of Black workers. The LA BWC is hopeful that community-labor alliances will grow exponentially to support the work of worker centers in Los Angeles and nationwide with these efforts. “Though the LA BWC is small and our gains are not as deep and sweeping as many unions are used to, our potential is great and the power is being built,” says Smallwood-Cuevas. “That’s where we see ourselves as equals with labor. We’re equal in our vision for all Americans to have good jobs that pay a family wage.” **P<sup>2</sup>**