

“BEYOND THE RHETORIC”

Harry C. Alford

Construction Unions and Civil Rights Groups – a Bad Formula

Since the beginning of the idea of integration and business development within African American communities, construction unions have been livid and contentious against the efforts. When the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was enacted, construction unions did their best to coo civil rights groups from fully implementing the law. That's why it caught them all by surprise when the first signs of implementation came from the conservative/Republican camp. Dr. Arthur A. Fletcher started the implementation out of President Nixon's Department of Labor.

First was the Philadelphia Plan which integrated and set rigid goals for the activities of the Philadelphia shipyards. It shocked the unions into a crisis mode but there was nothing they could do. Next came the Chicago Plan and the unions there dug in. When Art entered the Palmer House Hotel and began his briefings, the head of the Chicago unions called Secretary of Labor Schultz and exclaimed, "It's bad enough you are starting this stuff but did you have to send a n_____ to present it?" The union workers swore that Art would not leave the Palmer House alive. They surrounded the hotel and a few broke through security going door to door yelling "Where's Fletcher?!!" Art and his secretary secured his hotel door with all the furniture they could move. The riot outside and the vigilante action inside did not stop until President Richard Nixon called Chicago Mayor Richard A. Daley Sr. and stated, "I have put the 101st Airborne on alert. You hurt my guy in any way and they are going to take over your city within 24 hours." Daley called off the goons. But it wasn't totally over. The close friend of the Chicago construction unions at the time, the Mafia, put a contract hit on Art. It took Nixon's

order to the FBI to make this go away.

The unflappable Art Fletcher continued with his mission – to present Affirmative Action to the United States. Constantly, he met adversity from liberal civil rights groups who could not understand how he could do this without their permission. There were congressional hearings and they would come in opposing his views and ideas. The unions decided to “buy” influence within these groups and, perhaps, slow or even dismantle his efforts. Year after year Art would go to the annual convention of the NAACP and request a resolution of support for Affirmative Action. And year after year the union influence would forbid the management of the NAACP to raise the issue. In fact, it wasn't until 1990 that the NAACP proposed and passed a resolution supporting Affirmative Action, 21 years after the Philadelphia Plan.

It's much worse today. It saddens me to see the NAACP back into the fund raising doldrums again. The fat unions will circle around like vultures in the Savannah and inject more of their money and vicious influence on them even more. They are going to be there like never before pushing for construction union proposals that will cause great disparities in hiring and training for African Americans. Construction unions have employment disparities that are totally counter to the Civil Rights movement and the views of its pioneers. It is sad we have come to this point. It takes groups like the National Association of Minority Contractors and the National Black Chamber of Commerce to fight these assaults. One would think we could just watch and thank our brothers in the Civil Rights Arena to do this but instead we find ourselves fighting them.

In what has been the greatest triumph for the adversarial construction unions in the 1990's was the changing of 49 CFR Part 23 to 49 CFR Part 26 by US Department of Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater under the authority of President Bill Clinton. It reduced the power of Affirmative Action by the USDOT to the pleasure of the union lobby. There at the announcement and press conference was the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, standing next to Secretary Slater, applauding the debacle. Subsequent to that Secretary Slater canceled Executive Order 11246 which sets the standards for employment counting and tracking of the racial make up of a workforce. On the Cancellation Order was a reference made to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. It was like – “Hey, it's all right with them so all of y'all be cool”. The problem is that “them” included our nemesis the construction unions who had them in their pocket.

This was a very sad moment and turn of events. When the Bush Administration came in they exclaimed “Hey, don't blame us. Your people did it to you”. We have yet to hear a voice of outrage or complaint about this from any civil rights organization yet. We will fight this and win in the end. Too bad the victory will come void of the civil rights community.

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