

Appeal to a hire power

By Cora Davis
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As a small business owner and resident of South Los Angeles, I know – we all know - that our community is in dire need of jobs. In fact, for longer than I can remember, there have been no jobs and no opportunities for people who live in this community. Statistics, unfortunately, demonstrate this reality. Forty percent of African-American males in Los Angeles are not in the workforce. That's twice the national average, and it is a shame and a tragedy.



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Next month, the Community Redevelopment Agency Commission will consider a new set of policies that could help prospective African-American workers in South L.A. obtain apprenticeships for jobs in their own communities.

being considered by the Community Redevelopment Agency Commission in late February. This policy is critical for our community because it will require that local low-income residents, including the hardest to employ, have a shot at good union apprenticeships that will lead to middle class careers in the construction industry.

We need and deserve good jobs that can lift us, our neighbors, our friends, and our family out of poverty and hardship. Too often, the “hard to employ” are told that they’re lucky to get *any* job. For those who make that argument, the “hard to employ” often means two types of folks: 1) those who are trying to re-enter the workforce from prison, homelessness or welfare, and 2) those who live and attempt to work in South L.A. In either case, most folks end up in low wage jobs - with no benefits - and the cycle of poverty continues. Those of us who live in South Los Angeles witness this poverty and hopelessness every day – and we know we need real community revitalization. That means responsive and accountable development with the kinds of businesses and housing that will strengthen, not exploit, the community. Most importantly, it also means access to good middle class jobs that will sustain our families, our community, and our city.

I live near Florence and Normandie and have lived there for many years. As a young African American woman from South Los Angeles, I was one of the rare people who got into a union apprenticeship program. Based on that experience, I can personally attest to how an apprentice program and union construction job can turn your life around, and I think this community needs *more* of those types of opportunities. I started with nothing – but with a union construction job, I became somebody. I was able to make a good home for myself and my daughter (who I raised as a single mother), and she is now 27 years old and working towards her PhD in psychology. I was also able to use the skills I learned in a union apprenticeship program, and as a union construction worker, to eventually open my own contracting business.

Now, unlike when I became a union member, there is a genuine collective effort by our community leaders, organized labor, and policy makers to open up opportunities for decent middle class jobs for our community. Part of this effort is a policy called the Construction Careers and Project Stabilization Policy that is

The Construction Careers Policy is an outgrowth of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa’s Faith Based Construction Initiative, a program that works with South Los Angeles ministries to identify potential candidates for union apprenticeship programs in the building and construction trades. Similar to the Mayor’s program, which resulted in over 500 new construction jobs for African-Americans last year, the Construction Careers Policy will help to ensure access to training and job opportunities for the unemployed and working poor in Los Angeles’ poorest communities. As a result, it will help to raise families out of

poverty and hopefully, over time, change the social and economic landscape of our communities with an infusion of middle class jobs and capital.

Of course, the type of jobs that become available is also a critical factor in the health of our community – and it's a fundamental part of the proposed policy.

For example, my business is small, but I take pride in employing union electricians on all of my jobs. I have the opportunity to do for the young men and women in my community what was done for me as a young woman: give them employment that guarantees good wages, health and retirement benefits, and a safe and healthy workplace. I generate union jobs because they can help to uplift people. Unfortunately, not all contractors take this approach; but under the Construction Careers Policy, more of the locally-available construction jobs will be union construction jobs.

I also take pride in my work – work I was well-trained to do by going through a union apprenticeship program. Apprenticeship programs are the most effective means for making sure new construction workers are prepared for successful careers in the trades, and union apprenticeship programs graduate more apprentices than non-union programs. Even more important, studies have found that union apprenticeship programs graduate more African-Americans and more women than non-union programs. I feel secure with the workers on my jobs because I know that union apprentices get the best training both in terms of skills and workplace health and safety – and as an African-American woman who employs apprentices, it matters to me that more people *like me* are getting opportunities where unions are involved. Under this policy, more of these union apprenticeships will be available locally.

For many years, our community has been ravaged by poverty and violence. Ultimately, this has been a consequence of limited jobs and opportunities. Unless union leaders, community leaders, and we as community members, help our young people, nothing is going to change. Supporting the CRA Construction Careers Policy is a powerful way to advocate for those young people – and the entire community – because it ensures more South Los Angeles residents have a pathway to good, union jobs in the construction industry. By embracing this policy and playing an active role in its implementation, we can begin to turn the tide – and make change a reality.

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