

City's poor should be job one

The good news in the nearly 200 pages of "The State of Black New York," a report being issued today by the New York Urban League

and a coalition of community groups, is that the city's building boom offers a chance to break down the walls that have long kept black workers out of construction sites, sidelined from an industry where an estimated \$26 billion changed hands this year. While the city's unemployment rate is under 5%, the rate for black New Yorkers is nearly 8%.

I can't think of a social problem in New York's black neighborhoods — drug abuse, shattered families, crummy housing, failing schools — that wouldn't improve by leaps and bounds with an increase in the number of parents holding solid, good-paying jobs with benefits and pensions.

That's why city leaders, from City Hall to the smallest neighborhood nonprofits, must seize on this unprecedented opportunity to open doors that will give low-skilled, lesser-educated New Yorkers a shot at some of the city's estimated 123,000 to 175,000 construction jobs.

Entry-level workers in construction make more than \$30,000 annually, and the average yearly wage is more than \$66,000. Experienced workers average more than \$69,000 a year.

In an industry where many jobs don't require much initial schooling — a third of all new construction hires don't have a high

school diploma — these are some of the best jobs a New Yorker with limited education can expect to land.

But after crunching the numbers, the Urban League report concludes: "Based on their schooling attainment and the schooling requirements of the industry, blacks and Latinos are highly under-represented in the construction industry... even after accounting for schooling attainment, native-born black males are close to 60% under-

represented in the construction industry and suffer wages that are close to 40% below the industry average."

That's not just a shame, it's a disaster in the making.

There's little hope for our inner-city neighborhoods, the Brownsvilles and Harlems and South Jamatecs and Sound-



Errol Louis

views, if guys who didn't make it through high school — the 200,000 New Yorkers between 16 and 24 who aren't in school or working — can't get on those job sites and begin learning a trade and earning a decent wage.

There's rarely been a better time to attack the long, ugly history of nepotism and discrimination in the building trades.

At the same time that mega-projects are being launched around the city — from the new Yankee Stadium in the Bronx to Queens West, Atlantic Yards and the rebuilding of the World Trade Center area — the average construction worker is 40 years old, and 30,000 are expected to retire

over the next 15 years.

The Mayor's Commission on Construction Opportunity, the Bloomberg administration's plan to help cure the construction jobs mismatch, is still in its early stages, boosting funding for training and apprentice programs and the newly created, Queens-based High School for Construction Trades, Engineering and Architecture.

A more aggressive approach, blessed by the Urban League, is

the model of Local 28 of the Sheet Metal Workers Union. Sued for discrimination in the 1960s — the union had not admitted a single minority member in its 79-year history — Local 28, monitored for years by a court-appointed special master, developed outreach and training practices so effective that black men are now overrepresented in the union's ranks.

The Urban League is calling for an independent commission to

monitor New York's construction industry on the theory that close scrutiny of the kind given the sheet metal workers is the best way to force construction firms, and unions to change old patterns.

It's certainly worth a try. With the future of countless families and neighborhoods at stake, the city must take every possible step to make sure all New Yorkers share in New York's renaissance.

elouis@ny.dailynews.com

Thursday, November 29, 2007

DAILY NEWS