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The benefits of project labor agreements along with the myths



Washington, D.C.'s new Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge was completed one month ahead of schedule, which was accomplished with the use of a PLA.

By Carpenter Contractor Trust
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When you're driving by a construction site in the D.C. Metro area, do you ever wonder how all those moving parts meld together in an organized and coherent effort? How do all those construction workers seem to approach the task with a single-mindedness that results later in a grand new structure?

On a well-run project, the secret is most likely a **project labor agreement** (PLA).

PLAs bring order and specific responsibility to public construction projects. They are binding agreements that call for collective bargaining between labor and contractors. In addition, they define the terms and conditions applicable to all workers – union and nonunion – on public construction projects.

It's what they deliver – an agreed-upon concerted outcome – that makes them so effective. They provide stability to larger construction projects while ensuring compliance with workplace safety and health laws, wage protection and equal opportunity.



Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge under construction.

Government officials recently touted the **completion of Washington, D.C.'s new Frederick Douglass Memorial Bridge** one month ahead of schedule. It was the largest public infrastructure project in D.C.'s history. This was accomplished with the use of a PLA.

PLAs have existed since the 1930s because their components provide cohesion to each project, including stability and predictability, diversity and local jobs, and training and advancement.

Stability and predictability

PLAs add order by clearly defining each contractor and craft worker's responsibility. They address labor issues, designate cost standards, prevent shutdowns and are mindful of maintaining completion schedules. Construction sites might seem chaotic to outsiders, as trades work independently. PLAs provide coordination and leadership to this process while acting as a mediator to prevent any disputes.



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During the construction cycle, there is little that decision makers – municipal leaders, developers, builders, and contractors – find more problematic than misunderstandings and chaos. They both lead to an argumentative merry-go-round affecting timelines, costs and effective management. PLAs virtually eliminate these issues, often beforehand, because the rules and responsibilities are enshrined in black and white.

Diversity and local jobs

Nothing helps a project gain allies with public officials and the community at-large like promoting the hiring of workers that are local constituents. And when a project can attract women or minorities, both of whom the industry has underserved, their enthusiasm increases. PLAs can vigorously encourage hiring efforts from small businesses, minority contractors and local workers while emphasizing government-required safety training. For example, a PLA can stipulate that a worker has undergone and obtained OSHA certification. This reinforces the "safety first" attitude of the workers and reduces accidents.

Training and advancement

Most contractors want the most highly skilled, well-trained worker available. PLAs pay considerable dividends by preventing costly errors and accidents because of their emphasis on training. Union carpenters, for example, spend a minimum of four years with in-class and real-work experience before becoming a journeyman. Continued education classes after graduation keep them abreast of the newest trends, materials and potential new skills. This is evident, for example, in the growing wind energy sector, which will require a new skill level for workers in the construction industry.

Myths about PLAs

Some anti-PLA rhetoric denounces these agreements by spawning myths. They include:

- PLAs apply only to union workers. False. They apply to union and nonunion workers, and they don't mandate that workers must join a union.
- Some critics claim that PLAs reduce the number of bidders on public projects, thus raising costs. False. A 2020 study in the [Public Works Management & Policy journal](#) reviewed 263 bid openings for community college construction in California from 2007 to 2016. This first-ever study of its kind concluded that the presence or absence of PLAs did not alter the number of bidders on a project.

Why do PLA myths exist, and why do certain companies object to using them? It's simple. Because, we believe, some companies want to reduce the competition. Without PLAs, they can skirt hiring mandates, disregard the need for certified skills among workers, and ignore efforts to provide job opportunities or training for women and minorities. Yet all these reasons pale against the most frequent motivation: **worker exploitation**, which is widespread in the construction industry. The unethical practice of paying below standard wages or paying workers off the books is eliminated when entities utilize a project labor agreement.

The core value that PLAs offer is transparency. It is a public document. Anyone can review it – municipal officials, organizations, construction companies and the general public – to assess whether the agreement is fair and makes sound business sense. Indeed, it raises the obvious question of why anyone would not support a PLA.

We consider it to be the fairest, most transparent, and productive approach to conducting business in the construction industry while benefiting taxpayers, municipalities, construction businesses, and workers.

*The **Carpenter Contractor Trust (CCT)** is a labor-management trust formed to bond the relationship between the trained talents of union carpenters and their qualified signatory contractors to gain market share within the Eastern Atlantic States Regional Council of Carpenters.*