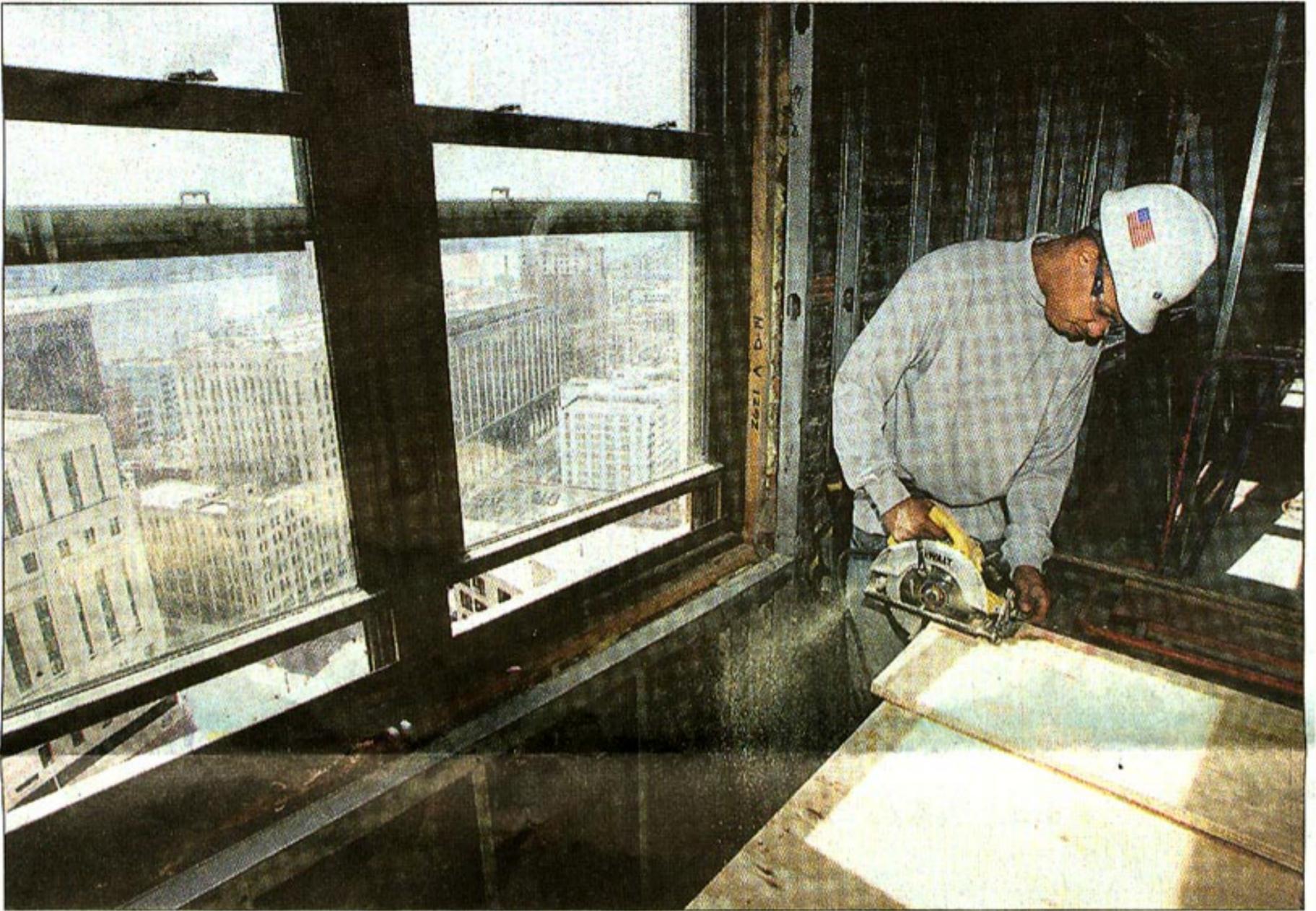


Study says 7 out of 100 construction employees in Detroit are black, leading some to ask...



Photos by Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

Martin Coleman, 26, works at the Book Cadillac Hotel. He met his new boss through the Building Trades Task Force, which links workers to jobs and apprenticeship programs. Coleman also attends classes in which he can bolster skills and learn new ones.

Where are 'all the other black workers?'

By CINDY RODRÍGUEZ | *The Detroit News*

DETROIT — During his 20 years as a construction worker, 43-year-old Vincent Allen has learned a lot about skilled building. He knows how to put in high pressure gas lines, operate heavy machinery, gut buildings, pour concrete, do masonry and landscaping, install storm pipes and build tunnels.

He loves the work and the healthy salary he makes.

But one question about the industry perpetually gnaws at him: Why are there so few black construction workers in a city that is 83 percent black?

"On a lot of projects I've been on I am one of very few," said Allen, who is African-American. "There's some consolation in being chosen, but on the other hand what about all the other black workers?"

Many Detroiters have been wondering the same thing, too. Motorists drive past construction sites and look, in bewilder-



To address the disparity in work crews, Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick has ordered all city projects have at least 51 percent of work hours done by Detroiters.

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ment, at the makeup of work crews. They bemoan the problem on radio talk shows. Various departments within City Hall have fielded complaints.

The problem is real, according to a national study released this month that listed Detroit as having one of the worst parity rates. The study, commissioned by a network of nonprofit agencies and researched by several university professors using 2005 census data, revealed that just seven out of 100 construction workers working in Detroit were black.

It saps the potential of black men in Detroit, who would be able to support their families with construction work.

The complaints have spurred various City Hall powerbrokers to act.

On Thursday, Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick signed an executive order that requires that all city projects have at least 51 percent of work hours performed by Detroiters.

The original Executive Order 22, which had race and gender set-asides, was nullified because of the passage of Proposal 2 — the state initiative that bans the use of racial and gender quotas in hiring.

If contractors don't abide by the new standards, they will be fined or lose their contract.

"The mayor is very serious about making sure Detroiters have access to jobs," said Sharon McPhail, general counsel for the city of Detroit.

At the same time, the city's Workforce Development and Human Rights departments have created a registry of city construction workers as a resource for contractors.

And City Councilwoman Brenda Jones in March created a task force that has already linked willing workers to apprenticeship programs and jobs.

"There are a lot of jobs in trades in the city," Jones said. "But Detroiters aren't getting those jobs."

Jones helped several workers land jobs through the Building Trades Task Force, which she cre-



Daniel Mears / The Detroit News

"A lot of construction sites there are out-of-state companies and they bring their own guys. And you have plenty of workers who are coming in who are white," says construction worker Martin Coleman.

ated in March. The group meets the fourth Tuesday of every month from 4-6 p.m. at the Coleman A. Young Municipal Center to strategize ways to link workers with employers and help fill apprenticeship programs.

Martin Coleman, a 26-year-old construction worker who had been looking for steady work, met his new boss at a task force meeting.

Now, he's working on the Book Cadillac Hotel, helping put up walls and doing trim work. As part of the job, he's enrolled in the Regional Council of Carpenters' apprenticeship training program. He's paid to attend classes every other Wednesday, bolstering skills and learning new ones so he can be more versatile.

"There were a lot of jobs out there that I had to turn down because I didn't know how to do it," he said. "The only jobs I could do were the ones I already knew how to do, and that limited me."

Coleman thinks discrimination probably plays a role in why so few black workers are hired, but

he thinks the greater problem is that a high proportion of African-American men don't have a high school diploma or GED, both of which are required to enter many union apprenticeship programs.

"There is discrimination — that's everywhere you go, but I feel mostly it's (the individual)," Coleman said. "Actually we have a lot of African-Americans in our union. But at a lot of construction sites there are out-of-state companies and they bring their own guys. And you have plenty of workers who are coming in who are white. You see all these Ohio plates and Indiana."

Willie R. Hall, the former president of the Monroe County branch of the NAACP, said he used to get complaints about discriminatory firings all the time: A black worker would be let go only to see a white worker take his place. He said those firings likely had more to do with nepotism than racial discrimination.

Those workers can be yanked off a job and replaced with a relative or friend and since there is no

seniority in construction, there is little recourse.

Still, he said that there is no excuse to not have more Detroiters — which essentially means more black workers — working construction sites in the city.

"With all the work that's being done in Detroit, they should be at the top of the list of getting hired," Hall said.

Allen, the construction worker with 20 years' experience, could not agree more.

"Go on some of these big road projects. Walk the highways and see for yourself," he said. "You will notice there are not many blacks. You will rarely see blacks on big road projects."

He said there are many contributing factors, but government, schools and unions need to tackle the problem.

"This has been a long-standing problem," he said. "It's just been going on too long."

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