

Transportation Industry: A route to success for Black men

Written by Freddie Allen NNPA Washington Correspondent
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WASHINGTON (NNPA) – When Jeffrey Brooks began his career in the transportation industry, the encouraging words of his parents echoed in his ears: "Go get a good job, a good job that you can retire from with a pension."

Now, 30 years later, Brooks, the administrative vice-president and director of the Transit Division for Transport Workers Union of America, hopes that message is not getting lost on millions of unemployed young Black men living in urban areas across the nation.

As Americans continue to climb out of the Great Recession inch-by-inch, Black men endure unemployment at nearly twice the national rate. Last month, the unemployment rate for Black men was 14.1 percent. For white men, it was less than half that rate – 6.6 percent over the same period.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, a non-profit organization that studies how economic policies impact low and middle-income workers, from July 2009 to May 2012 the unemployment rate for Black men was often higher in America's biggest cities.

EPI reported that about 25 percent of the jobs Black men lost between 2007 and 2011 occurred in the construction industry. Although Black men are often underrepresented in the construction and manufacturing industry, the transportation industry offers unique opportunities.

"EPI estimates that African Americans could obtain as much as 14 percent of all jobs created by large public transit investment projects. Blacks are only about 11 percent of the labor force, so these projects bring a slightly disproportionate benefit to Black workers," according to a brief published by the think tank.

"It's clear that Blacks have access and a somewhat easier career path in transportation than in other industries," said Algernon Austin, Director of the Race, Ethnicity and the Economy Program at EPI.

It's that career path that Brooks, now-retired from the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority, wants young Black men to focus on.

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Brooks climbed the ranks at SEPTA, starting on the railroad tracks that criss-crossed Pennsylvania and advancing to a heavy equipment operator a few years later. The Philadelphia native eventually took on leadership responsibilities as section officer, chairman, vice-president, and recording secretary. Brooks became president of the Transport Workers Union Local 234 in 2004.

"It was a struggle," Brooks said during a forum on transportation jobs hosted by EPI in September. "It wasn't like they gave it to us. We had to fight tooth and nail to get where they were."

As union president, Brooks fought hard to create opportunities for minorities, in the highly-skilled, high paying positions at SEPTA where Blacks are often underrepresented. Brooks worked with the city and state leaders to create internship and apprenticeship programs to expose young people, especially those living in urban areas, to careers in transportation.

"I went into the school district sat down with the mayor, the governor and other legislators and what became important was building a partnership between the school district of Philadelphia, the transit workers union and SEPTA," Brooks said.

Brooks partnered with the Transportation Learning Center a group that creates training opportunities for the front-line workforce in the transportation industry across the nation. TLC receives funds from the Federal Transit Administration, the U.S. Department of Labor, and the Transit Cooperative Research.

Brian J. Turner executive director of TLC said that the Labor Department is projecting 38 percent growth in employment in the transportation industry.

"Transit rail ridership is growing like crazy," Turner said. "You also have an older workforce where 40 percent of frontline workers, the people who maintain and operate the transit system, are expected to retire in the next 10 years."

We need to be training up that next generation, Turner added.

Unfortunately, the transportation industry has one of the lowest levels of investment in skill development of any industry, Turner said, limiting the efforts of groups like TLC.

On average, industries invest 2 percent of payroll in human capital. According to Turner, the nation's transit systems invest between 0.6 to 0.8 percent in the development of human capital.

"Without human capital, physical capital can't do anything useful," said Turner. "Physical capital can't run itself. It can't run on time. It can't run efficiently. It can't operate safely without human capital."

Turner said that with more money invested in training, TLC can implement framework national training standards, apprenticeships, systems.

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Brooks said that this type of framework, similar to what is being implemented at SEPTA in Pennsylvania, that can be used as a model for other transit systems in urban areas.

Brooks admits that many people don't see the career opportunities that the public transit system provides.

"Transit jobs are not sexy, said Brooks. "Most people just think that this is just a man driving this bus up and down the street."

Brooks said that schools become critical in impressing upon students that public transit is somewhere that you can go to gain skills and branch out into other fields.

Austin said that students should also learn about the career mobility and income opportunities that the transportation industry.

"Hopefully, we'll all have long lives and as you progress through life and start a family, you have kids, college tuition to pay medical expenses, etc. you need occupations that will allow you the opportunity to advance have greater income, to save and to put money away for your retirement," Austin said.

Brooks said that it's up to leaders in the industry, state and local officials to continue to push to make transportation careers a real opportunity for young people living in urban areas.

"What I learned a long time ago is that jobs are one year, two years and you're gone," Brooks said. "A career is something that I just did. Thirty years in the same employment, 30 life-sustaining years."