



PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

Construction workers attend a Workers Rights Board meeting in July. The T-shirt being shown says "si se puede," or "yes we can," coined by labor leader Cesar Chavez.

# City stalled on fair and equitable contracting

Portland labor groups demand end to worker exploitation on all publicly funded construction projects

BY EMILY GREEN  
STAFF WRITER

Pressure is mounting on local policymakers to ensure taxpayer-funded construction projects aren't used to exploit workers, but rather to train and provide meaningful employment to members of marginalized communities.

To accomplish these goals, on recommendation from local trade unions and labor rights groups, the Portland-area Workers Rights Board wants officials to use the Community Benefits Agreement model on all construction projects in Portland and Multnomah County that rely "to any degree" on taxpayer dollars.

This recommendation was the focus of the board's report delivered to Prosper Portland, formerly Portland Development Commission, on Oct. 3 and to Portland City Hall on Oct. 6.

It's not a new idea. City Council in 2012 unanimously passed a resolution to consider CBAs for projects costing \$15 million or more. Since the

completion of two successful pilot projects, however, the model has been abandoned.

CBAs establish minority and women apprenticeship and journey-level goals, as well as the utilization of contracting companies owned by members of disadvantaged communities.

The agreements were created in response to a 2009 disparity study that showed significant

underutilization of women- and minority-owned contractors on city projects.

The CBA model was tested on two city projects, the Kelly Butte Reservoir and Interstate Maintenance Facility. Both surpassed women and minority apprenticeship goals and disadvantaged-contractor goals. Only the goal for women journey-level positions was unmet.

Both projects came in on time and under budget and utilized an oversight committee to ensure fair labor practices were being met at job sites.

Proponents of these agreements are dumbfounded as to why the city is proposing to replace CBAs with what they say is a watered-down and loophole-filled plan for projects costing more than \$10 million.

"I'm perplexed why we wouldn't stick to the proven model of the CBA when we've had two very successful pilot projects that were run through the Water Bureau," Commissioner Chloe Eudaly said. She campaigned, in part, on more widespread use of this model and said much of what makes CBAs successful is missing from the city's proposed plan.

"Apologies and murals and a few hundred housing units are not enough for what's been done to minorities in our community," Eudaly said. "Providing workforce training and living-wage jobs to people who have been denied economic opportunity for generations is one of the most important things we can do, and these are public dollars that we're spending, and I think we should be spending them on the most responsible and beneficial way possible."

CBAs include oversight committees that visit job sites, checking on-the-ground compliance and talking to workers. Labor rights activists say this ensures that tax dollars aren't going to exploit workers because unscrupulous

contractors and subcontractors are quickly expunged from projects.

"The key to success lies in the teeth of the oversight committee. Otherwise we basically run the risk of becoming another feel-good ordinance that looks great on paper but really does nothing to help anyone," Ben Basom recently told a room full of construction workers and their families. Basom is the communications director at Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters and helped shape the CBA model.

It was July 27, and he was speaking in the auditorium at St. Charles Church in Northeast Portland. It was packed for a meeting of the Workers Rights Board.

The four-member board – composed of Oregon Rep. Diego Hernandez (D-Portland), Portland State University economics professor emerita Mary King, the Rev. Jack Mosbrucker and community organizer Ranfis Villatoro – was convened by Portland Jobs With Justice in response to a request from the Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters.

It was from this meeting that the board's report delivered to Portland officials this past week was crafted. It's titled "Exploitation of Immigrant Carpenters in Portland: Community Strategies for Justice," and can be read in full at [news.streetroots.org](http://news.streetroots.org).

The board listened in the church's auditorium that day to four Latino wood framers share stories of being exploited in Portland's construction industry.

Jésus Pulido immigrated to the U.S. from Michoacán, Mexico, when he was 6 years old. At age 16, he followed in his father's footsteps and began working in construction. He said that right away, he noticed Hispanic workers

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CHLOE EUDALY,  
PORTLAND CITY COMMISSIONER

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