

U.S. Department of Labor

Wage and Hour Division
Washington, D.C. 20210



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Dear Ms. Nadeau:

This is in response to your August 4, 2011 request, on behalf of the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) and IUOE Local No. 12, that the Wage and Hour Division (WHD) recognize field surveyors performing on-site work that is functionally integrated with construction subject to Davis-Bacon labor standards as a subclassification of operating engineer that may be listed on Davis-Bacon prevailing wage determinations.

DOL guidance concerning survey crews

The DOL provided guidance concerning the applicability of Davis-Bacon labor standards to survey crews in All Agency Memoranda (AAM) Nos. 16 and 39, dated July 25, 1960 and August 6, 1962, respectively. AAM No. 16 distributed a June 29, 1960 letter issued by Acting Solicitor of Labor Harold C. Nystrom in response to a request by IUOE Locals 3 and 12 for reconsideration of the position expressed in a September 14, 1955 letter issued by Acting Assistant Solicitor Baird concerning the status of survey crew workers under the Davis-Bacon Act. In the 1960 letter, Acting Solicitor of Labor Nystrom observed that:

In [the 1955 Baird] letter, it was pointed out that survey work was often a pre-construction activity performed under a contract separate and apart from that which actually called for construction within the meaning of the Davis-Bacon Act and related Acts. It was also stated therein that the members of survey crews were engaged in professional or subprofessional work and could not, therefore be considered 'laborers or mechanics' within the meaning the [Davis-Bacon and related] Acts.

Acting Solicitor Nystrom, responding to the request of IUOE Locals 3 and 12, determined that:

Although the position which we have previously entertained is of long standing we have again undertaken to review the subject and have arrived at some new conclusions.

It is still our position that preliminary survey work such as the preparation of boundary surveys and topographical maps is not a part of construction covered by the Act, especially if performed pursuant to a separate contract. We are prepared, however, to assert coverage of survey work which is undertaken immediately prior to or during

construction which involves laying off distances and angles to locate construction lines and other layout measurements. This includes the setting of stakes, the determination of grades and levels and other work which is performed as an aid to the crafts which are engaged in the actual physical construction of projects.

With respect to the status of particular employees, we agree that the chainmen and rodmen whose work is largely of a physical nature such as clearing brush, sharpening and setting stakes, handling the rod and the tape and other comparable activities are laborers and mechanics within the meaning of the Act. On the other hand, a party chief has duties which would appear to place him in an executive class with overtones of a professional. Such a person always supervises two or more persons on the job The party chief also has substantial clerical duties and exercises the arts of the engineering profession. Both of these classifications are, of course, excluded from the group commonly accepted as laborers or mechanics.

The only classification which presents substantial difficulty is that of an instrument man working under a party chief as part of a four man crew. These men may occasionally perform the physical work of rodmen or chainmen. They also may carry and place the instruments as well as operate them. They make the sighting and take and record the readings. They may be called upon to exercise discretion, judgment and skill involving problems encountered in the field and they must be able to read blueprints and make sketches or drawings. Again, on the other hand, while construction is actually in progress they may function only as an aid to the construction workers in such matters as determining the placement and levels of pilings, the placement of steel beams and girders, the location of bolt holes, etc. In the specific area covered by your application [i.e., the request by IUOE Locals 3 and 12], they are members of a union engaged in an apprenticeship trade and customarily paid by the hour.

While working under a party chief, instrument men are not employed in a bona fide supervisory position. Neither do they qualify as professionals under Regulations, Part 541, issued under the Fair Labor Standards Act. The tests provided by these Regulations or tests similar to them are quite commonly accepted under both Federal and State laws. Therefore a substantial amount of physical work being involved, we believe it appropriate to regard the instrument men employed under a chief of party as laborers or mechanics with the reservation, however, that a contrary conclusion might be reached in particular cases if the facts and circumstances were different from those reflected in your presentation. Accordingly it is our intention to include in future wage determinations where appropriate, the classifications of 'rodmen', 'chainmen' and 'instrument men (serving under a party chief).

Further guidance was issued in an August 2, 1962 letter from Secretary of Labor Arthur J. Goldberg to the Ohio Society of Professional Engineers, which was widely distributed as an attachment to AAM No. 39, dated August 6, 1962. In that letter, Secretary Goldberg referenced a conference he had held with representatives of the Ohio and National Societies of Professional Engineers on May 29, 1962 and a report submitted by the Ohio Society setting

forth its position that the duties of instrumentmen, rodmen and chainmen were "technical in nature" and "part of the engineering process" and not covered by the Davis-Bacon Act.¹ Upon careful review, with regard to whether the work performed by such persons constitutes construction, alteration, and/or repair, the Secretary determined that:

Since preliminary survey work merely affects construction without being a part of it, it is our position that such work is not generally covered by the Davis-Bacon Act. On the other hand, where surveying is performed immediately prior to and during actual construction in direct support of construction crews, such surveying would be deemed construction work within the meaning of this act.

He proceeded to observe that "[c]overage of the individuals performing this work would further depend upon their individual status as laborers or mechanics" and he noted a definitional distinction between the term "laborer" as "one who performs manual labor or labors at a toilsome occupation requiring physical strength as distinguished from mental

¹ In addition, on July 18, 1962, Solicitor of Labor Charles Donahue discussed the status of survey crews in testimony before the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, Special Subcommittee on Labor, concerning Administration of the Davis-Bacon Act. In its July 1962 hearings, the Subcommittee also heard testimony and accepted extensive materials on this subject for the record from Mr. Roger Loveless on behalf of the National Society of Professional Engineers. Subsequent to the testimony presented by Mr. Loveless, Solicitor of Labor Donahue asserted in his oral testimony, and in the written testimony he submitted for the record, respectively:

By and large, any preliminary surveys concerning construction are not subject to the Davis-Bacon Act. They are not part of the construction contract. ... Now there are occasions when survey work is done in connection with the construction contract. There are cases where foundations are tested, holes are bored, there are other occasions where the surveys are made of the path of a highway, for example, across the country, directly in connection with construction, and in those cases, only in those cases, we would consider the survey as part of the construction work. [Oral testimony.]

[I]n many cases, survey work is not done as part of the construction contract, However, in certain cases such work is done as a part of the construction contract, and accordingly, the status of the members of the survey crews becomes an issue. The question to be resolved is, as the Attorney General pointed out, primarily a factual issue. In certain instances some members of the survey crews perform primarily manual work such as clearing brush and sharpening stakes, and in these cases the Department considers an employee so employed to fall within the definition of the term laborer. In other instances the work of the survey crews is limited to work of a professional or subprofessional character. In such instances survey crew members are not considered to be laborers or mechanics.

The Department's interpretation is in agreement with Mr. Loveless' conclusion that survey crews are covered only to the extent to which they perform work of a manual character.

Hearings before the Special Subcommittee on Labor of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, 87th Congress, "A General Investigation of the Davis-Bacon Act and its Administration," hearings held in Washington, D.C. July 12, 13, 18, 24, 26, 27, 31, and August 7, 1962, Part 3, pages 806 (oral testimony) and 823-824 (written testimony submitted for the record).

training and equipment" and the term "mechanic" as "any skilled worker with tools, one who has learned a trade."² In that context, he further stated that:

A determination that certain members of survey crews fall within this category depends largely upon questions of fact. This determination, which takes into account the actual duties performed by the employees involved, is primarily the responsibility of the contracting agency.

In those cases where the work of an individual functioning in a survey crew is considered professional or sub-professional in character, this Department has held, in accordance with your view, that one so employed is not a laborer or mechanic within the meaning of the Davis-Bacon Act. On the other hand, where individuals perform primarily manual work, such as clearing brush and sharpening stakes, they would fall within the definition of the term 'laborer'. It is my understanding that situations of the latter kind are not commonplace. However, to the extent that individuals are so employed, they are covered by the aforementioned law.

On numerous occasions since June 1962, the 1962 Goldberg letter has been reasserted as the framework of DOL policy regarding applicability of the Davis-Bacon labor standards to survey crew members employed on projects subject to Davis-Bacon requirements. In a January 10, 1964 letter to the California State Conference of Operating Engineers, then Under Secretary of Labor John F. Henning stated that:

[T]he Solicitor has reviewed the material which you forwarded regarding the coverage under the Davis-Bacon Act of workmen who, with respect to construction are engaged essentially in the transfer on the job site of lines and grades from blueprints to stakes, monuments, and points for use by various classes of construction workers.

From the particular facts and circumstances presented, the Solicitor has concluded that the duties of rodman, chainman and instrument man, which are described in your presentation, are those of laborers and mechanics under the act, as it has been interpreted in former Secretary Goldberg's letter of August 2, 1962, to the President of the Ohio Society of Professional Engineers. The workmen involved appear to perform predominantly manual work as contrasted with work which is professional or subprofessional in character.

² Secretary Goldberg cited 18 Comp. Gen. 341 as the source for this definitional distinction. The definitions appeared in Comptroller General Decision A-97726, concerning the applicability of the 1912 Eight-Hour law. The full paragraph in the Comptroller General's decision states:

The terms laborer and mechanic have been defined variously in numerous decisions in the courts, usually in connection with the application of lien statutes, but generally the term 'laborer' is defined as one who performs manual labor or labors at a toilsome occupation requiring physical strength as distinguished from mental training and equipment, while a 'mechanic' is any skilled worker with tools who has learned a trade. *In re Osborne*, 104 Fed. 780. Also see 'Words and Phrases' generally as to laborers and mechanics. Hence, the statute is applicable to every public contract otherwise within its terms which may require the employment of labor by hand or tools for its performance.

The Solicitor has further indicated that this does not in any way reverse the aforementioned letter of August 2, 1962. There it is recognized that whether workmen come within the compass of the terms 'laborer' or 'mechanic' presents largely a question of fact. Consequently, determinations of coverage may well vary in specific situations.

We shall include prevailing wage rates for the classifications noted above in future determinations for work to be performed in California and Nevada, whenever they are requested by the procurement agency or whenever it is apparent from the work to be performed that such classifications will be used in the construction process.

With regard to survey crews, section 15e20 of the WHD Field Operations Handbook (FOH) currently states that:

(a) Where surveying is performed immediately prior to and during actual construction, in direct support of construction crews, such activity is covered by DBRA. Under the United States Housing Act of 1937 and the Housing Act of 1949, the "development of the project" coverage test is broader and may also cover preliminary survey work.

(b) The determination as to whether certain members of survey crews are laborers or mechanics is a question of fact. Such a determination must take into account the actual duties performed. As a general matter, members of the survey party who hold the leveling staff while measurements of distance and elevation are made, who help measure distance with a surveyor chain or other device, who adjust and read instruments for measurement or who direct the work are not considered laborers or mechanics. However, a crew member who primarily does manual work, for example, clearing brush, is a laborer and is covered for the time so spent. [Emphasis added.]

IUOE assertions

You have asserted that the "WHD should start with the premise that workers employed on the 'site of the work' performing work that is functionally integrated with the construction are covered unless they are exempt for a reason specifically contemplated by the [Davis-Bacon] Act." You also have asserted that "based upon its misreading of a series of opinions issued between 1960 and 1964 the WHD has taken the position that only very limited functions performed by survey crews are covered"; that "the WHD has misread the regulatory definition of 'laborer and mechanic' in limiting coverage to workers based on the degree of physical demands of on-site construction jobs"; and that "if the WHD continues to limit coverage to work that is physical or manual, the WHD should nonetheless find that the field surveyors are 'laborers or mechanics.'" IUOE letter, pages 1, 14, 19, and 22.

The regulatory definition of laborers or mechanics, set forth in 29 CFR 5.2(m) states:

The term *laborer* or *mechanic* includes at least those workers whose duties are manual or physical in nature (including those workers who use tools or who are performing the work of a trade), as distinguished from mental or managerial. ... The term does not

apply to workers whose duties are primarily administrative, executive, or clerical, rather than manual. Persons employed in a bona fide executive, administrative, or professional capacity as defined in part 541 of this title are not deemed to be laborers or mechanics. Working foremen who devote more than 20 percent of their time during a workweek to mechanic or laborer duties, and who do not meet the criteria of part 541, are laborers and mechanics for the time so spent.

In this context, you describe the duties of field survey crew members as ranging from very physically demanding work, such as use of heavy sledge hammer to pound in laths, walking over challenging terrain, standing, stooping, bending, and carrying heavy objects (including GPS equipment) to more skilled work involved in executing plans prepared by office surveyors. You further indicate that due to technological changes, the norm is no longer the use of four-person crews including a supervisory member, but rather the employment of two-member crews in which a "party chief" is a lead person who performs the functions also performed by other survey crew members. You further state that no minimum level of formal education beyond a GED is required to become a field surveyor, field crew members are not required to hold a license or certification, and they do not exercise judgment or discretion in executing directions of the office surveyors. You assert that the members of field survey crews should not be generally considered as "professional" or "executive" employees. You also note that the mathematical knowledge needed to perform the work of a field surveyor, along with the physical demands of their work and their use of tools and equipment, are comparable to what is also true for other skilled construction trades workers.

Analysis

Since issuance of the 1960 Nystrom letter, the Department has taken the position that some work undertaken immediately prior to or during construction that is performed by survey crew members may be subject to the Davis-Bacon labor standards on covered projects. Clearly, since issuance of the 1962 Goldberg letter, it has been DOL policy that determinations as to whether certain members of survey crews are laborers or mechanics is a question of fact that must take into account the actual duties performed, and this agency's guidance has consistently held that where individuals perform "primarily manual work, such as clearing brush and sharpening stakes," they would fall within the definition of the term "laborer." We note that the 1962 Goldberg letter, while acknowledging a distinction between "laborers" and "mechanics," focused on duties that warrant requiring individual survey crew members to be considered "laborers." The question of whether members of a survey party might be considered "mechanics" – skilled workers with tools, who have learned a trade – generally has not been the focus of guidance concerning survey crew members who work with, adjust and read instruments to take measurements of distance and elevation, or otherwise measure distances and identify locations. In determining whether a worker (including a member of a survey crew) is a "laborer or mechanic" as defined under the Davis-Bacon Act, the touchstone is whether the worker's duties "are manual or physical in nature (including those workers who use tools or who are performing the work of a trade)." 29 C.F.R. 5.2(m).

The status of survey crew members as laborers or mechanics on projects to which the Davis-Bacon labor standards apply depends on the duties they perform. As you noted in your request for reconsideration of the WHD guidance concerning survey crews, the job titles used in classifying survey crew workers vary geographically. Along with variations in job titles, the duties of the classifications may vary from one area to another. Certain prior guidance issued by the Department concerning survey crews employed on construction projects has indicated that individual members of survey crews whose duties are "primarily professional or subprofessional" would not be considered laborers or mechanics. As is made clear in the definition of the term "*laborer or mechanic*," professional employees who meet the requirements for exemption under 29 CFR Part 541 are not laborers or mechanics within the meaning of the Davis-Bacon Act. Available information suggests that the term "sub-professional" encompassed survey crew members employed by engineering firms, including individuals pursuing a course of study to become professional engineers.³ We believe, however, that a focus on whether survey crew members are "sub-professional" cannot substitute for the central inquiry of whether the duties of a survey crew member performing on-site work that is functionally integrated with construction subject to Davis-Bacon labor standards are primarily physical and/or manual.

As we have not closely examined survey crew classifications and duties in detail in recent years, we believe that it is appropriate to identify and evaluate the extent of physical and manual work performed by the various survey crew classifications in use today. For example, you have suggested that current practices include the assignment of significantly modified and diverse duties to survey crew members who perform various tasks such as rodmen (who traditionally held the rod or leveling staff); the chainman (who uses a chain or other devices to assist in the measurement of distances and elevations); and other field surveyors who adjust and read surveyors' equipment (with an element of clerical work involving the recording of data) and/or possibly direct the work of others (in effect, as working foremen). To the extent

³ Mr. Loveless, in his testimony on behalf of the of the National Society of Professional Engineers before the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, Special Subcommittee on Labor, cited above, Part 2, pages 544-545, asserted:

We think that the Nystrom opinion classifying members of survey crews as 'laborers and mechanics' was based on information that is not truly representative of the duties of these personnel throughout the country. It is very important that we recognize our subprofessional people for what they are. We are professional engineers and we have laborers and mechanics. In getting our work done today there are the people in between professionals and laborers and mechanics, many of whom we classify as subprofessional. It is important that their contribution be recognized. To take a man with 2 years of college or one who is a licensed surveyor or who may be a recent college graduate and is performing these duties as part of his training program in aspiring to become a professional engineer and classify him as a laborer or mechanic is not good for the country. We have to stimulate and move these people up. The engineers work hand in hand and arm and arm with these technical personnel. ... We would like the Congress to define the classification of these people as subprofessional. I think that it is important countrywide.


What we are saying here is that this work is predominantly of a technical and subprofessional and professional category; that if a contractor uses these to cut brush he shouldn't be using them on such and ... they do not fall into this category: In other words we see no reason under Davis-Bacon to list the wages of instrumentmen, rodmen, and chainmen because if they do what they are supposed to be doing they are not laborers and mechanics.

such survey crew members perform primarily physical and/or manual work on the site of the work in direct support of construction crews, such crew members would qualify as laborers or mechanics within the meaning of the Act and its implementing regulations. Moreover, in determining what constitutes physical and/or manual work, we believe it is appropriate to eschew an unduly narrow interpretation of the types of duties that qualify as physical and/or manual. Tasks such as clearing brush or sharpening stakes, for example, are merely illustrations of physical and/or manual work, and by no means reflect the full range of duties that may be considered physical and/or manual.

As we discussed earlier, WHD has historically acknowledged that individuals who perform primarily physical and/or manual work can be considered to be laborers or mechanics and subject to the Davis-Bacon labor standards when employed on the site of the work immediately prior to and during construction and in direct support of construction crews under covered contracts. As a result of our review in response to your request, steps will be taken to ensure that in the conduct of future prevailing wage surveys and in the processing of requests for additional classifications and rates (conformance requests), appropriate consideration will be given to survey crew workers employed by contractors and subcontractors in work performed immediately prior to or during actual construction in direct support of construction crews; and the Davis-Bacon labor standards will be applied to individuals performing such work when they perform primarily physical and/or manual work (including those workers who use tools or who are performing the work of a trade). For example, section 15e20 of the FOH will be revised to reflect that, consistent with a fact-based analysis, survey crew members who perform primarily physical and/or manual work will be considered laborers or mechanics. More detailed guidance will be issued in the near future to advise the contracting agencies concerning the implementation of this policy.

This letter constitutes a final ruling under 29 CFR 5.13 concerning current WHD policy regarding the applicability of Davis-Bacon labor standards to survey crew members. A petition for review may be filed with the Department of Labor Administrative Review Board pursuant to 29 CFR 7.9.

Sincerely,


Mary Beth Maxwell
Acting Deputy Administrator