



Cornell University
ILR School

Labor Research Review

Volume 1 | Number 12
*Up Against the Open Shop: New Initiatives in
the Building Trades*

Article 6

1988

BAC's Comeback: The Bricklayers' Renewal Program

David Bensman

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BAC's Comeback: The Bricklayers' Renewal Program

Abstract

[Excerpt] The Bricklayers' and Allied Craftsmen's International Union (BAC) typifies the contemporary crisis of the building trades. Membership plunged from a high of 160,000 in 1970 to just over 100,000 in 1986. As a result, the International Union ran a budget deficit five years in a row. Fewer than half the craftsmen in BAC's jurisdiction now belong to the union, and many BAC members can be found working on nonunion projects. Even where union contracts prevail, wage and work-rule concessions have become standard fare.

But BAC is not taking its decline lying down. Over the past five years, the International Union has embarked on an imaginative process of renewal, one which combines efforts to revive the masonry industry with programs to strengthen the union through education, organizing, and structural reform. While it is too early to tell whether BAC's campaign will succeed, it is already clear that the effort has brought new hope and determination to a union that desperately needed them.

Keywords

Bricklayers' and Allied Craftsmen's International Union, BAC, organizing, renewal

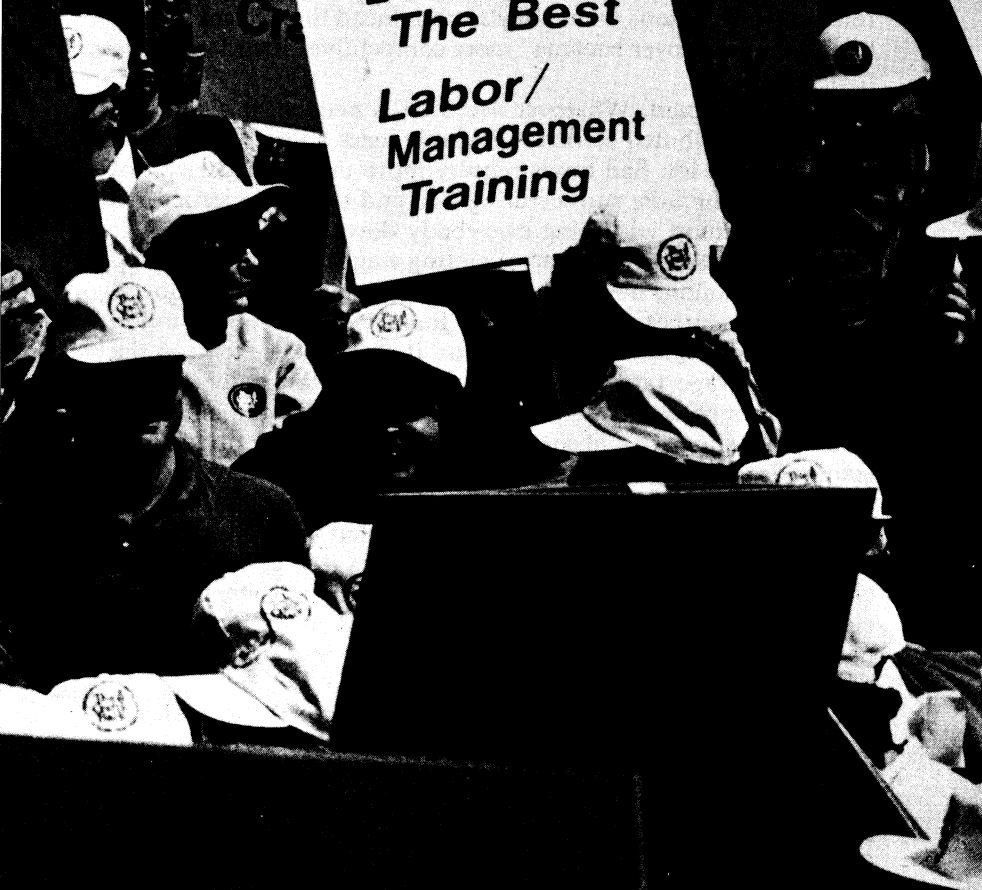
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BAC's Comeback

The Bricklayers' Renewal Program

■ *David Bensman*

The Bricklayers' and Allied Craftsmen's International Union (BAC) typifies the contemporary crisis of the building trades. Membership plunged from a high of 160,000 in 1970 to just over 100,000 in 1986. As a result, the International Union ran a budget deficit five years in a row. Fewer than half the craftsmen in BAC's jurisdiction now belong to the union, and many BAC members can be found working on nonunion projects. Even where union contracts prevail, wage and work-rule concessions have become standard fare.

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- *David Bensman, one of Labor Research Review's associate editors, is director of the Graduate Program in Labor Studies at Rutgers University. He is co-author, with Roberta Lynch, of Rusted Dreams: Hard Times in a Steel Community (McGraw-Hill and U. of California Press, 1987). LRR is grateful to Ramon Castellblanch and Theresa Ghirladucci for sharing their research on the Bricklayers.*

that desperately needed them.

BAC's decline had two primary causes. The first it shared with all building trades unions—the contractors' open shop offensive. While the union remains strong in two dozen cities in the Northeast and Midwest, throughout most of the nation nonunion contractors have grabbed an ever-increasing share of the business.

In some regions where the union used to be dominant, the growth of nonunion contractors was gradual. First they bid on projects union contractors disdained, primarily residential and light commercial construction. As they developed experience, financial backing, and plentiful supplies of labor, they began to bid for larger and larger contracts. They also pushed politically for the repeal of state prevailing wage laws on public construction. Eventually, in order to compete, union contractors set up nonunion subsidiaries; as union jobs dwindled, increasing numbers of highly skilled union craftsmen began working nonunion. In regions where the union was none too strong to begin with, the prolonged recession of the early 1980s, combined with aggressive corporate anti-unionism, all but killed BAC locals.

Adding to BAC's miseries was the decline of the masonry industry. In the years 1972-1987, the dollar value of masonry shipments dropped 14% as competing products—wood, glass, metals and plastics—gained market share. Masonry's poor market performance derived in large part from the structure of the industry: contractors tend to be small firms with little capital. Caught in intense competition, they have little money for marketing or for research and development.

The Project 2000 Strategy

In 1983 BAC's Executive Board proposed creation of a planning committee to study how BAC could best deal with its problems. This was not to be a top-down planning effort, for the Executive Board recognized that one of BAC's major problems was the great distance that existed between its International Office and its locals, which were used to running their own affairs. To make sure that the planning committee's recommendations would reflect the diversity of the union's membership, the Executive Board named 28 local business agents to the new committee. Two Harvard professors, D. Quinn Mills and Michael Maccoby, were named as program coordinators.

The committee named itself the Project 2000 Committee and began holding hearings with business, labor, and academic experts around the country. Input from BAC members came in the form

of opinion polls as well as "focus group" sessions. Early on, it became clear that two crucial issues were not in doubt: union members and leaders wanted BAC to remain an independent union rather than to merge with another, larger union, and they wanted BAC to remain a union of masonry craftsmen. Other issues were more controversial and required extended discussion. Finally, in July of 1985, the Committee adopted recommendations to be forwarded to the upcoming national convention.

The Project 2000 Committee proposed that BAC take the lead in advancing the industry's competitive position by stepping up union involvement in the industry's strategic decision-making. This could be done through active participation in several organizations, most notably the International Masonry Institute (IMI)—a joint labor-management organization established to conduct programs in market promotion, research and development, training, and labor/management relations.

By taking the lead in fostering the industry's technological advance and growth in market share, the union would accomplish several goals. First, of course, the industry's growth would create jobs. Second, BAC's program would improve the competitive position of union contractors by helping them develop leadership in the use of new technology, and by providing them with the best-trained, most productive labor force. Thirdly, BAC would signal to nonunion contractors that working with the union could produce profits and productivity.

In Spring 1988 BAC put teeth in the Project 2000 Committee recommendation by requiring all locals to make their best effort to negotiate a 3% employer contribution to an IMI fund for apprenticeship training, marketing, and research and development. The first local agreement which included the full 3% employer contribution was negotiated in June 1988.

IMI's primary research and development effort has been in the area of panelization. Over the past decade, builders have changed the way they put the outside skins of buildings together; they now use panels which can be bolted and welded together, rather than separate pieces of brick, stone, or cement. This change has hurt the masonry industry as well as the bricklayers' union, because structural building contractors (who employ structural iron workers) have been more aggressive in going after the new business than have masonry contractors. In order to win more panel construction contracts for the masonry industry, IMI has been conducting a joint labor-management training program to teach journeymen to do the new work, and it's been educating and encouraging contractors to go after the new business.

IMI also works closely with architectural associations to cultivate appreciation of the advantages of masonry materials. At BAC's apprentice training school, the IMI sponsors a summer camp for young architects.

The second major thrust of the Committee's report was strengthening BAC's international officers and governing bodies. In the past BAC, like other building trades unions, has had locals that operated nearly autonomously and a relatively weak International office. Now, the Project 2000 Committee argued, since the causes of the union's problems were national in scope, a stronger national union was necessary.

The Committee did not propose strengthening the International through constitutional changes transferring power from locals to the International. Instead, the Committee recommended that the International Union continue the process of involving local unionists in national programs. One way to facilitate this process was creation of a new national body, the Executive Council, to involve local representatives in national decision-making in the periods between conventions. The new Council includes 35 locally-elected members as well as the 12 Executive Board members who are elected on an at-large basis.

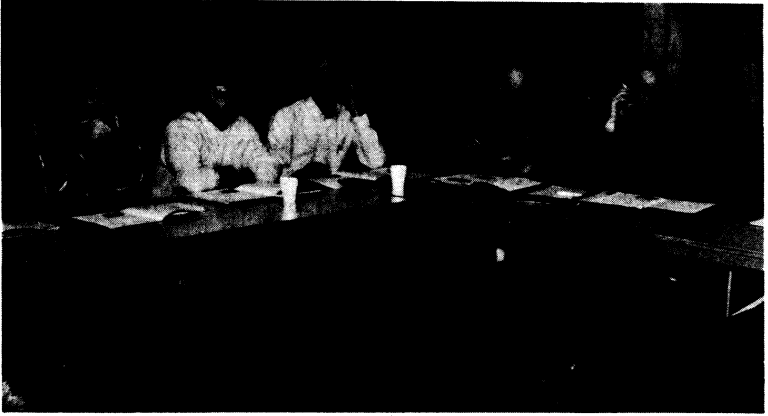
Another way of strengthening the union was creating a new institutional level, the region. The Committee recommended that seven regional offices be created, each headed by new officers—International Vice Presidents—who could both represent locals at International meetings and provide support to locals that could not afford full-time officers or furnished offices.

Education was equally important to the union-building effort. The Project 2000 Committee recommended that BAC expand its Education Department and develop a comprehensive plan to train local leaders and involve rank-and-file members in discussions of the union's problems, goals, and strategies.

Study Circles

The Education Department has launched a Study Circle program—modeled after the Study Circles of the Swedish labor and cooperative movements—to bring discussions of union issues to the membership. In the program's first year, 1987, local leaders throughout the country were trained to lead two Study Circle curricula, one devoted to the Project 2000 Committee report, and the second to the history and goals of BAC and the labor movement in general.

By June 1988, 2500 rank-and-file members had participated in



Courtesy of International Union of Bricklayers
& Allied Craftsmen (BAC)

...study circle in Ashland, Kentucky.

five-week Study Circles, and the program appeared to be expanding. But more important than the numbers is the democratic spirit in which the Study Circles have been conducted. BAC leaders seem confident that once the membership looks at their union's—and industry's—problems in a national context, they will support the Project 2000 agenda. As a result, they don't believe it necessary to conduct their education program as a sales job. What's more important than selling Project 2000 is giving members a sense of participation in their national union, a feeling that their national officers are listening to them. At the national training sessions for Study Circle leaders, education department officials teach how to facilitate discussion, stressing the importance of eliciting rank-and-filers' experiences and opinions.

Andy Gallante, business agent of Local 44 in Poughkeepsie, New York, ran four 15-member study circles about Project 2000 in 1987. This year four more study circles, with 60 participants, are discussing local bargaining agreements. Gallante encourages each participant to express an opinion pro or con on the subject under discussion, and then asks members to respond to what others have said. The goal is to involve everyone in the discussion. At the end of each session, members complete a questionnaire evaluating the meeting and proposing the next subject for discussion. Gallante believes the process has strengthened membership understanding of the union's policies and has increased membership loyalty to the union.

Richard Kisse, business manager of Local 7 in Ashland, Kentucky, is also a firm believer in the study circles' necessity and value. Kisse recalls that at the conclusion of the International

Union's local leadership training program, participants were asked to fill out an evaluation questionnaire; as skeptical fellow business agents looked on, Kissee wrote pages and pages of comments and suggestions for improving the program. When the program for the following year appeared, incorporating many of Kissee's suggestions, he was convinced that the BAC leadership was truly committed to gaining the active participation of the rank-and-file.

BAC's situation in the Ashland area is difficult. The Ashland local has 115 members, and there are as many bricklayers working nonunion as there are working under union contracts. When the Kentucky legislature repealed the state's prevailing wage law, union contractors lost the ability to compete on public contracts, and many BAC members began taking jobs on nonunion projects. Over the past few years, no more than 14 members attended local union meetings, which usually became gripe sessions aimed at the International Union. The local could not afford an office or a full-time business agent. On unionized worksites, the bricklayers had lost the respect of better-organized crafts, because BAC contracts lacked such elemental provisions as periodic breaks.

For the last two years, Kissee has been using study circles to rejuvenate the local. For each session, Kissee must rent a room, shop for refreshments, sweep the floors, set out chairs, make coffee, and set up his own VCR to show the labor history videotapes with which he supplements the standard curriculum. So far, he has run two study circles, each attended by 12-14 members.

Kissee believes that the education program has transformed Local 7. There are now a substantial number of members who understand their industry and support the International Union's strategy. Attendance at local union meetings is up, and bad-mouthing the BAC leadership is down. In contract bargaining, the local is working toward gaining employer contributions to the industry renewal fund for the IMI programs.

Kissee acknowledges that there are substantial obstacles to the growth of the Study Circle program as well as of Project 2000 as a whole. In many surrounding locals, because membership has dropped so low, business agents must work full time at the craft, and the burden of organizing study circles after normal work hours is excessive. Furthermore, when a local's bargaining position is weak, and union contractors are having a hard time competing, the IU's industry renewal fund seems unattainable.

Elsewhere, in large locals where there's plenty of work, other obstacles confront the IU's program. Here, business agents may be so busy making job assignments and policing contracts that

there's little time left for education programs. Besides, if all of a local's members have work, which is now the case in some booming regions, there's little incentive to support national industry renewal. Why ask employers to contribute 3% to renewing an industry that's booming locally, when the same money could finance wage hikes or benefit improvements?

Fighting Anti-Unionism

Aggressive anti-unionism remains BAC's greatest problem, however. While Project 2000 envisioned joint labor-management action to advance the masonry industry, the trend toward double-breasting and nonunion contracting continues. When the Masonry Contractors Association of America (MCAA), the industry's key employer group and BAC's partner in the International Masonry Institute, voted to admit nonunion employers, it was an ominous sign that the fight will not be easy.

BAC President Jack Joyce was so incensed by the MCAA's decision that he removed MCAA members from the IMI's Board of Trustees and then encouraged organization of a rival, all-union employers' association. While the new association has gained considerable credibility, IMI is now weaker than it was before MCAA decided to admit nonunion contractors, and this is a real obstacle to BAC's industry-recovery strategy. Moreover, anti-unionism continues unabated in many parts of the country.

In order to combat employer anti-unionism, BAC is implementing a number of organizing strategies. In Norfolk and Richmond, Virginia, which BAC chose as targets for pilot projects because local construction was booming and union contractors were having trouble finding enough craftsmen, BAC hired consultants to poll nonunion bricklayers about their needs and priorities. The union then conducted radio and TV campaigns promising new union members steady work, improved health benefits, and training programs that would enable them to become fully-skilled craftsmen. More than a hundred nonunion bricklayers responded to the ads, and each union's membership increased by more than 10%.

In Norfolk this success proved short-lived, however. The problem was that some local union officers, who were white, were not enthusiastic about enrolling large numbers of blacks into their ranks. Soon, many of the new black members were back to working on nonunion projects.

The surfacing of racial prejudice in Norfolk troubled BAC's leaders, but did not undermine their determination to organize.

Before they began spending International Union funds on a Richmond organizing campaign, they made clear that the local would have to grant full membership status to all newly-enrolled members. On that basis, the Richmond campaign proceeded, proving once again that well-targeted campaigns could succeed in enrolling nonunion workers.

In New Jersey, where tight labor markets are causing problems for building contractors, the state conference of Bricklayers is planning a drive to organize the now completely nonunion residential construction industry, despite the fact that all union bricklayers in the Garden State currently have all the work they can do. BAC will advertise openings in programs to train bricklayers for residential construction, and will then offer contractors trained, assured labor forces in exchange for union contracts. Plans are to enroll the new members in a separate division of the union, with lower wage rates than fully-trained craftsmen.

The organizing campaigns in Virginia and New Jersey are both



Courtesy of BAC

bottom-up efforts aimed at signing up nonunion workers. Top-down campaigns to sign up nonunion contractors have been rare in the past half century of Bricklayers' unionism, but pilot programs are now underway in Phoenix, Arizona, and Tampa, Florida.

BAC is also experimenting with a variety of other programs to create jobs and organize members. In Birmingham, Alabama, where masonry was almost entirely nonunion in the mid-1980s, BAC helped establish a worker-owned cooperative that has been growing rapidly. Initially, five union members formed the cooperative, called Jefferson Masonry Inc. (JMI). Banks were reluctant to provide the relatively large amounts of working capital JMI needed, partly out of their prejudice against cooperatives. BAC, which saw the project as a way of reestablishing itself in Birmingham, provided start-up financial backing, and when the co-op found a niche doing high-quality, high-cost masonry, BAC provided additional working capital. The firm has grown to employ 25 Bricklayers. Now BAC is working with Chris Mackin of Ownership Associates in Boston to explore a financing mechanism that will allow it to use pension bonds in a revolving loan fund to support additional co-ops in nonunion areas.

The effort of Boston Bricklayers to build union-subsidized low-cost housing is particularly interesting because it demonstrates the potential not only to create jobs but also to improve the union's community relations and political clout. This is an area of high priority for a union whose decline was partly caused by legislative defeats on the state and federal levels. The repeal of prevailing wage laws in seven states hurt badly; so had Congressional enactment of rapid depreciation rules in the tax code, which stripped brick buildings, which tend to be longer-lasting but more expensive to build, of their long-term cost advantages.

After the Massachusetts legislature came close to repealing the state's prevailing wage law several years ago, the Boston Bricklayers local joined with the Laborers to sponsor construction of low-income housing. In 1985, the two unions formed a non-profit housing development company headed by Tom McIntyre, a BAC Vice President from the Boston region. After developing a good working relationship with Boston Mayor Ray Flynn, the company acquired land at reduced rates, obtained financing leveraged by union pension funds, and chose contractors and subcontractors with whom the unions had good relations. One of the innovative features of the effort was the creation of "development deposits," through which union pension monies are invested in bank certificates of deposit. These deposits are the leverage to induce banks to provide financing for the low-cost housing

projects.

While neighborhood residents did not gain preference for employment through the union's hiring halls, they were encouraged to apply for union apprenticeship programs, and their applications for the new housing were given priority. At the lottery drawings conducted to choose homebuyers, the building trades unions took the opportunity to explain their goals and practices to assembled community residents. In the first project, 18 two-story brick row houses were sold for \$65,000 each—in a housing market where the average price of a home is \$149,000. The Bricklayers & Laborers Non-Profit Housing Co. is now working on 200 additional units it hopes to sell for between \$71,000 and \$78,000.

The Boston low-cost housing program not only created jobs for union members, it also generated considerable good will for the building trades. Kevin Fitzgerald, state representative from Mission Hill, one of the low-cost housing sites, believes that the program "raised legislators' level of consciousness" regarding unions. And Tom Gallagher, a former state representative, believes that the program helped bolster the movement to save the state's prevailing wage law.

Whether or not the Boston low-cost housing program proves replicable elsewhere—and it requires a strong local housing market, impressive labor political clout, and good relations among a variety of local building trades unions—the program illustrates BAC's new willingness to innovate and take risks. That attitude is quite a departure from the traditionalistic insularity that has marked the world of the building trades for much of this century.

Conclusion

It is too soon to tell whether or not BAC's renewal program will succeed. In 1987, the union's membership decline was halted, and its financial deficit was erased. Furthermore, the masonry industry is growing once more, as builders and architects find masonry more attractive and affordable. But whether these developments indicate the beginning of a long-term recovery, or merely reflect cyclical phenomena, is by no means clear.

BAC's leadership is providing its membership with vision and a sense of direction; it is communicating better, listening more, and providing local leaders with more support. Yet huge obstacles remain. Within the union, there is by no means a firm consensus for change. Many locals lack the resources and bargaining power to implement their union's strategy. Many union members are far



Courtesy of BAC

more willing to work for nonunion contractors than journeymen were just 20 years ago. Anti-union employers have gained dominance in many markets, discouraging union contractors and journeymen alike. Anti-union legislators in Washington and in state capitals throughout the country continue to give hope and sustenance to anti-union firms.

Despite these obstacles, BAC's program of union renewal deserves close scrutiny. If BAC's strategy, which combines taking the lead in reviving the masonry industry with membership education and mobilization, shows signs of success, it could serve as a model for troubled trade unionists throughout the country. ■