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Who Will Build the Future?

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Who Will Build the Future?

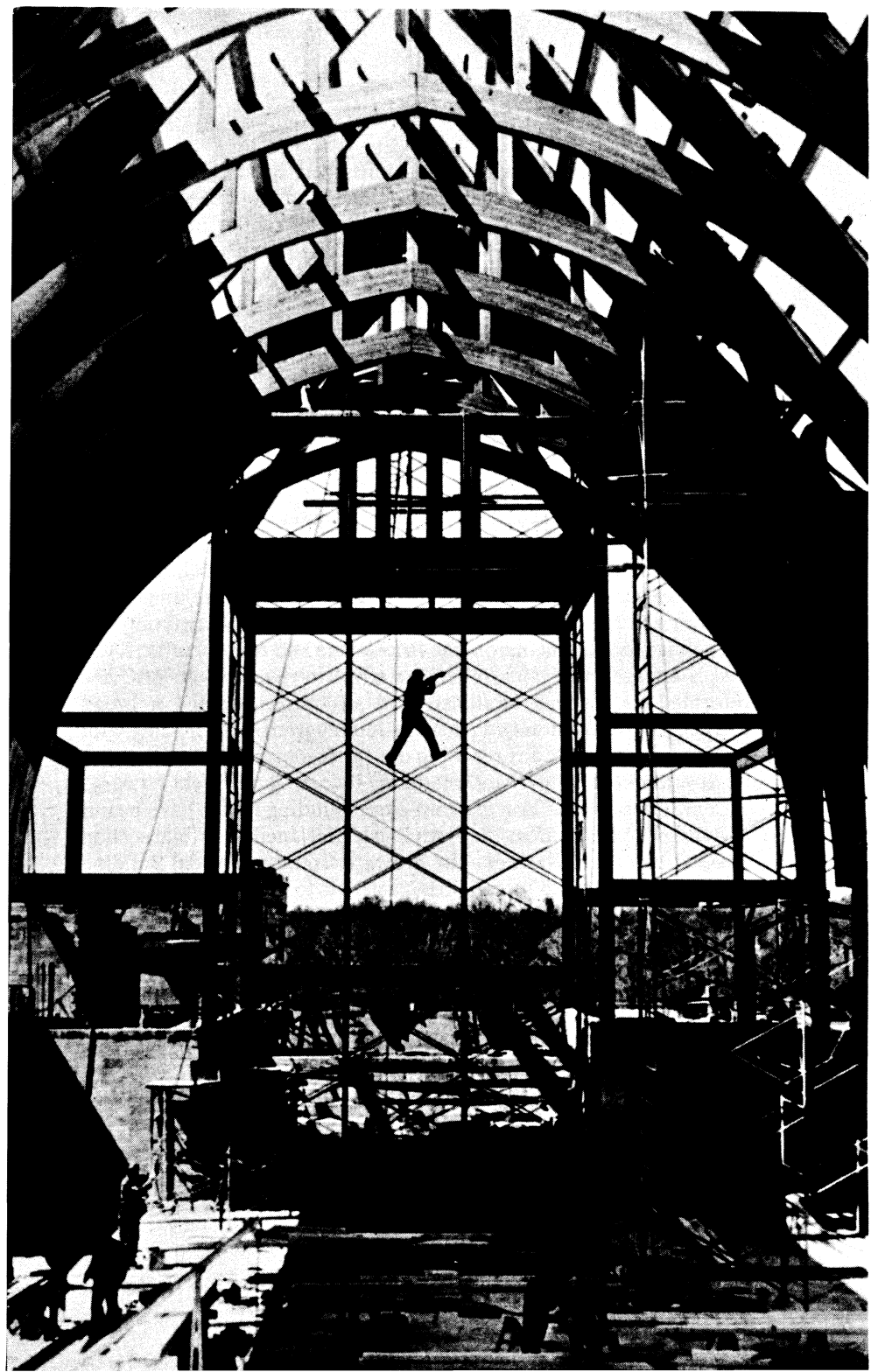
Abstract

[Excerpt] The construction unions' crisis both preceded and contributed to the general decline of organized labor. At the time "concessions" became a household word in manufacturing, building trades workers had already endured five years of wage freezes and cuts. Just as construction unions helped set standards in the past for wages, hours and political muscle for the entire labor movement, the rise of the open shop in construction was the opening salvo of an all-out assault on the house of labor in the 1970s and '80s.

Since World War II, building trades unions generally marched to their own tune, cementing their power locally and nationally, and often appearing indifferent to the fate of other sectors of the workforce. But their current crisis has evaporated the reigning sense of complacency and has forced union leaders to reconsider adopting the traditions of militancy and activism that built their organizations a hundred years ago. Drawing on some of the recent innovations throughout the labor movement, building trades unions are currently more receptive to new initiatives than at any time in the past 50 years.

Keywords

union, organizing, construction, building trades, labor movement



Overview

Who Will Build the Future?

■ *Mark Erlich*

Twenty years ago union construction workers were responsible for 80% of all construction activity in the United States. Outside of rural, residential and small-scale commercial projects, virtually all ironworkers, carpenters, electricians, plumbers, painters and other craft workers on construction sites across the country carried union cards.

Today just 30-35% of the construction dollar involves union workers. The uneven but forward progress of a century of union-building in construction has been reversed. Organized workers now represent only 22% of the total construction workforce.

Aided by some of the nation's most powerful corporations, open shop contractors have emerged as a potent economic and political force undermining trade unionism. The Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC), once an insignificant haven for nonunion homebuilders and marginal commercial firms, has grown from 17 chapters and 3,000 members in 1970 to 75 chapters with 20,000 members today. The ABC can now advance a sophisticated anti-union political agenda, and its members participate at every level

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- *Mark Erlich is a member of Carpenters Local 40 in Boston. He is the author of With Our Hands: The Story of Carpenters in Massachusetts (Temple University Press, 1986).*

of the construction market. Fluor Daniel, Brown & Root, BE&K, Blount and other nonunion giants bid on and build megaprojects on a national and international scale.

The war is by no means over, but the open shop clearly won the battle of the 1970s and early 1980s. Retreating building trades unions clung to their strongholds in major urban centers in the Northeast, Midwest and West Coast, and watched nonunion contractors gobble up traditional union markets elsewhere. In some places, construction union locals are now little more than numbers in the telephone book.

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The World of the Construction Worker

Construction is one of the most visible of all industries. At one time or another, most people have watched the unfolding drama of a high-rise edging skyward, a house taking shape, a road nearing completion, or a bridge connecting two pieces of land. The people who create these structures carry out their daily tasks in plain view. Unlike the assembly-line operative tucked away in an industrially zoned factory or the office worker encased in a vertical glass box, the construction worker's movements can be monitored on a daily basis by "sidewalk superintendents."

The high visibility of construction has produced an endless stream of popular images—from Lewis Hines' Depression-era photographs of heroic ironworkers erecting the Empire State Building, to the angry shots of pro-war hard hats in the late 1960s,

to the contemporary commercial portraits of sweating hunks enjoying their hard-earned Millertime.

For all this visibility, construction remains a poorly understood industry. Surprisingly little has been written on the subject. In the absence of thoughtful analysis, the dominant stereotype of the construction worker—even among other unionists—remains that of an overpaid, underworked, narrow-minded, bigoted, rough-and-tumble hard hat.

In part, people within construction are responsible for this general lack of familiarity. It has always been a highly insular world, with its own set of rules, values and traditions, and with a highly developed "insider" vs. "outsider" point of view. Knowledge of the various trades was often passed from father to son, resulting in a workforce that continually recreated itself and was difficult to penetrate. The construction labor force was never particularly diverse. It has been, and still is, a white male preserve. Despite affirmative action efforts in the late 1970s, blacks and Hispanics each make up only 7%, and women just 2%, of the total workforce.

Building trades workers tend to assume that their work is completely different from any other occupation. The shared exposure to danger, the terrifying insecurity of the boom-and-bust character of the business, and the physically demanding yet skilled nature of the work serve as powerful bonds between craft workers. For those who survive the initial years of adjustment, there is a sense of having entered a club that those on the outside can neither appreciate nor understand.

In the global economy of the 1980s with its mammoth multinational corporate organizations, the building business is an anomaly. Giant contractors like Bechtel, Fluor Daniel, and Kellogg operate on an international scale, and even homebuilding has billion-dollar firms, but the persistence of a niche for local and regional builders is astonishing. Census figures track nearly a million "mom and pop" outfits that function without *any* employees, and 98% of the nation's construction firms retain fewer than 50 employees (on-site craft workers plus office support staff). Nor are the small builders on the margins of the industry. They employ fully 60% of the construction workforce.

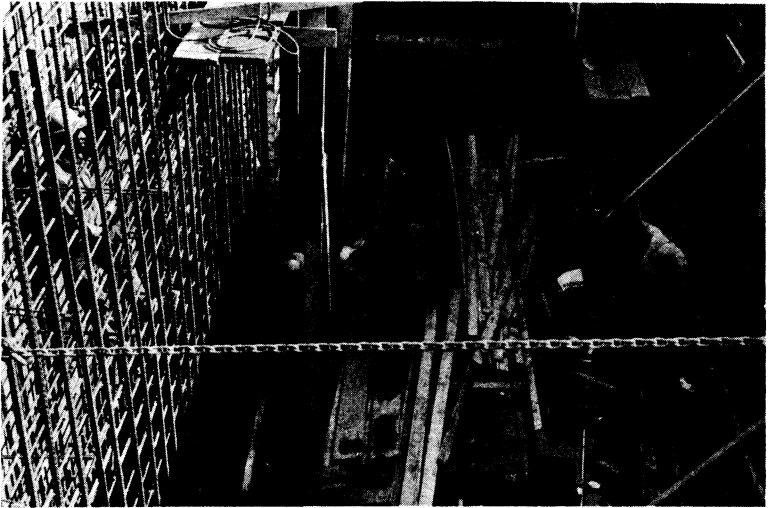
Construction workers certainly *experience* their work environment as decentralized. Workers focus on what the local market will bear as far as job security and pay scales are concerned, resulting in situations in which a union carpenter in New York City earns \$30.66 in hourly wages and benefits while his Dallas counterpart makes just \$16.22. Trades workers (particularly in the

union sector) move from contractor to contractor or follow building booms from region to region. In addition, many will, over the course of their working lives, dabble in self-employment. The option of throwing a toolbox in a pick-up truck and going it alone is always available, even if it is unlikely to bear much fruit. The chances of truly "making it" are increasingly remote, but the very possibility underpins a construction culture in which class identity and distinctions between employer and employed are sometimes blurred.

Building is a treacherous way to make a living. The industry employs 5% of the U.S. labor force, but is responsible for 20% of all job-related fatalities. The rate of construction injuries and illnesses far outdistances any other industry. Above and beyond the obvious dangers of skyscraper construction and the unsafe working conditions that are standard on too many sites, day-to-day life in the trades is no picnic. Tradespeople work in the blistering sun, biting cold and brackish muck, getting paid for only the hours and days the elements allow.

For all the physical hardships, it is the psychological insecurity of uncertain employment that drives many people out of the trades. The boom-and-bust nature of the business means that no one can ever count on long-term security. Regional variations in job prospects are staggering, and the booms in any one area never last long. Today's plentiful jobs in the Northeast follow hard on the heels of near 60% construction unemployment ten years ago. Even in the best of times, the oasis of overtime in the summer often is not enough to compensate for the wasteland of the winter months. Building trades workers average eight or nine months a year of employment, reducing the impact of their comparatively high hourly wages to annual incomes more typical of manufacturing.

The combination of a skilled labor force and a decentralized group of undercapitalized employers gave unionism an early foothold in construction. Individual builders did not have extensive financial resources to crush strikes. Continuing progress on a job depended on the experience stored up in the hands and heads of the tradesmen. While late 19th Century builders tried all the standard operating procedures of American employers—blacklists, lockouts, strikebreakers—they were unable to inflict lasting damage. Building trades unions emerged as a permanent part of the construction landscape in the 1880s and 1890s. By World War I, it was a matter of common wisdom in many parts of the country that "a craftsman without a [union] card was a man without a trade."



John Laursen, Jr.

The success of unionism was not just a matter of employer weakness. The chaotic nature of the business prompted far-sighted contractors to realize that unions could play a pivotal and positive role. With labor requirements varying wildly according to the individual job, season and cyclical condition, builders were hard-pressed to maintain a stable body of employees. Since unions were prepared to handle the tasks of training (apprenticeship) and supplying labor (the hiring hall), employers ultimately agreed to exchange union recognition, the closed shop and relatively high wages for the freedom to hire and lay off as their business needs dictated.

Despite numerous bitter strikes and periodic vicious open shop drives, this mutually agreeable arrangement guided construction labor relations from the beginning of the century until the early 1970s.

The Rise of the Open Shop

The collective bargaining equilibrium that lasted 75 years disappeared in the last 20. A new and uneasy equilibrium seems to have set in, but it defines unions as a minority, not a dominant, force. And, though the unions have managed to slow the open shop juggernaut, there is no guarantee that the next recession will not inflict further damage.

The roots of this transformation can be found in the spiraling construction costs of the 1960s. Inflationary pressures on materials

and labor set off alarms in the ranks of building owners, management consultants, corporate editorialists, and public policy makers. In 1969, 200 of the nation's top chief executive officers formed the Construction Users Anti-Inflation Roundtable (now called the Business Roundtable) in order to put a lid on construction bills. Roundtable members included the heads of General Motors, General Electric, Exxon, U.S. Steel, DuPont and a variety of other corporate luminaries with sizable construction budgets.

The perspective common to these forces was a desire to blunt union power. Most agreed with the hysterical analysis of a *Fortune* journalist who condemned the "murderous bargaining strength [of] the most powerful oligopoly in the American economy." In a widely distributed publication, the Roundtable sternly lectured building contractors on their inability to prevent unions from "usurp[ing] the employer role normally reserved to management in other industries." The CEOs issued a series of 23 lengthy reports spelling out very specific methods to "restore the control that employers traditionally exercise."

The heavyweights arrayed against the unions gained an important ally in 1974—the most severe building recession in the post-war era. Contractor business failures reached levels unseen since the Great Depression, and national construction unemployment hit 22% in May 1975. The jobless rate continued in double digits through the rest of the decade and into the early 1980s, peaking at 23% in October 1982. Building picked up slightly after 1982, but the devastation of the previous eight years had a chilling effect on bargaining.

Nonunion contractors had taken advantage of their lower labor costs to underbid their unionized competitors for the shrinking number of jobs during the recession. In turn, union builders pointed to the open shop threat to justify severe and sweeping concessions.

In 1984, union electricians in Seattle and suburban Los Angeles, carpenters in Atlanta and Denver, and plumbers in Arizona all took pay cuts in the range of \$5 an hour. In Houston contractors won a wage freeze in 1983, a 15% cut in 1984, and then demanded another 15% cut the following year. Paul Dobson of the Houston Carpenters District Council complained, "We've done everything but give them our shoes and socks." While some of the worst concessions of 1983-84 are slowly being won back, the bargaining outlook continues to be discouraging. From 1982 to the present, the average annual wage-and-fringe increase has never risen above 2.5%—well below the average annual increase of nearly 4% in the cost of living during those years.

Political access and influence has accompanied the growth of the nonunion sector. ABC representatives actively lobby against legal protections for construction workers. The principal item on their legislative agenda has been the elimination of the Davis-Bacon Act, a Depression-era law that requires federally funded construction jobs to be paid at the "prevailing rate" in the designated area. While Congressional supporters of the ABC have not been able to eliminate the law, they have written highly restrictive amendments in the past few years. The ABC also has led successful campaigns in seven states to repeal "mini Davis-Bacon" laws—legislation that requires payment of the prevailing wage on state- and city-funded projects.

Today, the field of contracting no longer includes just union and nonunion builders. A new hybrid called the "double-breasted" firm—a single company with a union and a nonunion arm—has appeared. In smaller operations, nonunion counterparts of union builders are seldom more than bare-bones corporations listed in a relative's name. Office space, equipment, and even payrolls overlap. Superintendents rush back and forth from union to nonunion jobs, while company drivers casually place magnetic signs with the nonunion name over the union logo painted on their trucks. The practice has made a mockery of union agreements. In an area that is still largely unionized, a contractor will bid on a job with his union firm; in settings where the unions are weak, he will use his nonunion name.

Amazingly, this arrangement has won legal sanction as long as a "maximum separation of operations" exists between the two entities. In practice, this technical nicety is usually overlooked. A House Subcommittee report labelled NLRB rulings on double-breasting "virtually a blueprint for the avoidance of lawful collective bargaining agreements." By now, double-breasting exists up and down the line in construction. In 1984, eight of the nation's top ten contractors were double-breasted.

The general anti-labor political climate, the recession and lower labor costs may have provided a window of opportunity for the open shop movement, but in the final analysis corporate subsidies proved to be the crucial gateway to success. Under the protective wing of the Roundtable and its allies, nonunion firms were handed projects of increasingly significant scale. Roundtable firms such as DuPont and Dow Chemical went so far as to adopt policies that actually barred union contractors from bidding on their projects. Open shop spokesmen have long acknowledged that their expansion was aided tremendously by political and corporate sponsorship.

The Open Shop and the Changing Nature of Building

Nonunion contractors have always been frank about their aims. They intend to reduce wages, weaken established working conditions, eliminate jurisdictional divisions, and lower expectations of a safe working environment. What many people, including some within the construction unions, have not grasped is that the open shop challenge extends to the way workers work.

ABC leaders have a vision of an industry that is more in tune with standard business practices, one that replaces a relatively egalitarian and collective workforce based on a common commitment to craft pride with a conventional hierarchical division of labor. The open shop vision dovetails with recent technological and organizational changes in the industry.

Automation is not relentlessly marching onto the job site, as it is in auto and steel. But prefabrication and specialization have transformed construction management techniques and the daily experience of the trades worker. The craft worker's traditional identity as a fabricator is gradually giving way to a new role as installer. Preassembled materials and modular components simplify the process of construction. Multi-story, factory-built homes can now be shipped on trucks to the site, complete with lighting and plumbing fixtures, appliances, hardware and a coat of paint. Even on conventionally built projects, units that were formerly put together on site, such as doors and windows, typically arrive prefinished. More and more of the highly skilled tasks once central to on-site construction are now performed in factories with the standard industrial division of labor.

In recent years, individual crafts have been fragmented into a series of subspecialties. Being an "all-around mechanic" is helpful, but no longer necessary to earn a living. For example, carpenters are trained as either concrete form, framing, drywall, ceiling, floor, door, cabinet or hardware installers. Many contractors actually prefer employees with limited training on the assumption that the specialized worker can perform his/her particular task with greater efficiency.

These changes affect both the union and nonunion sectors of the industry. But open shop builders have welcomed and promoted these developments more aggressively. ABC training programs are either nonexistent or six-week modules of highly specialized instruction, geared for the new semiskilled building mechanic in a way that the generalist four-year union apprenticeship programs are not. While spokesmen for the open shop often acknowledge that skill levels among union building trades workers are higher,

they argue that this disparity is not particularly significant in a construction industry less dependent on extensive craft knowledge.

For union and nonunion contractor alike, the adoption of prefabrication and task specialization is motivated by a desire to cut costs and boost productivity. But open shop employers have a greater ideological as well as economic incentive to support a reorganized industry. The nonhierarchical structure of union construction—all journeymen in a given craft receive the identical wage—is anathema to nonunion ideologues. Open shop firms typically hire a few experienced and relatively

well-paid trades workers to oversee a number of unskilled, poorly paid 18- to 25-year-olds. "That's the way it should be," remarks ABC's Stephen Tocco. "You don't need a brain surgeon to know how to frame or put forms together. That's what American productivity and American business is all about."



John Laursen, Jr.

The Union Response: Concessions

The meteoric growth of the open shop initially caught union leaders by surprise. Their unions had essentially run on automatic pilot through the prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s. Local union business agents defined their responsibilities to include little more than referring members to job sites, managing the books, and negotiating periodic contracts. Tasks such as internal education, organizing, and demonstrations of solidarity with other sectors of the labor movement—once rich traditions in a number of the building trades unions—fell by the wayside.

Many union officials initially refused to recognize the severity of the crisis in the hope that the decline in fortunes was a temporary aberration. But as the open shop grabbed more and more longstanding union markets, union leaders reluctantly acknowledged their problems would not disappear.

The success of the post-war construction jobs machine had

prompted union officials to identify their own success with the prospects and perspectives of the employers. When the situation soured, officials continued to turn to industry spokesmen for answers. Having abandoned an independent labor-developed viewpoint, they were reduced to parroting an industry-defined agenda. In an editorial in a 1982 issue of his union's magazine, Operating Engineers President J.C. Turner hailed a Gulf Oil executive's statement condemning repeated strikes, jurisdictional disputes, long coffee breaks, excessive absenteeism, tardiness, and leaving the job early.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the unions' first calculated response involved establishing joint bodies with union contractors that relied heavily on the contractors' analysis of the situation. In 1982 the AFL-CIO's Building and Construction Trades Department (BCTD) and the National Construction Employers Council (NCEC) agreed to establish a Market Recovery Program for Union Construction. Market recovery programs aimed to reverse the decline of union construction by boosting the quality and reliability of union contractors. Each area's program was autonomous, but most eventually evolved in common directions. For example, the stated goal of Philadelphia's Operation MARCH was: "to make union contractors more competitive... through increased productivity, increased efficiency and cost containment." Like many of the other programs, Operation MARCH used the Business Roundtable reports as guidelines.

The initial stabs at organizing followed a similar path. Multi-trade organizing projects were set up in Los Angeles and Houston. The Carpenters developed Operation Turnaround. But, as Carpenters organizer Jim Parker announced, the emphasis was on "trying to make union contractors that we have more competitive" through the prevention of strikes and the elimination of restrictive work rules. In practice, making contractors more competitive inevitably translated into wage concessions. The rank-and-file perception that "organizing" was just a screen for "concessions" was so common that the *Carpenter* felt obliged to publish a critical letter from the wife of a member. She complained that the union was doing her husband no good by asking him to forego a pay raise or accept a pay cut to stay on the job. "That's not turning anything around," she commented.

On the national level, the BCTD adopted a strategy of developing model project agreements to be signed directly with owners of massive construction projects. The plan was to adopt uniform working conditions binding on all local trades for the life of the

project. Once again, concessions built into the agreements provided the attraction for the owner.

Despite some successes, the outcome of the early project agreements was largely dismal. For example, in July 1983 the BCTD signed an agreement to cover all industrial work in the Houston area. The contract stipulated that all trades workers be paid 80% of union scale and that fully 40% of the workforce be made up of apprentices and a new category termed "subjourneymen." These classifications of workers could receive as little as one-half of the union scale. The concessions granted in the Houston pact were intended to appeal to industrial users who might otherwise have built their projects nonunion. By October 1983, less than three months after the agreement was signed, it became clear that the pact was worthless. No union jobs had materialized, and one of the main targets, Exxon, had awarded a \$500 million project to a nonunion contractor. BCTD President Robert Georgine concluded bitterly: "We may have been used as a tool to force down the bids of the open shop contractors."

These experiments with concession bargaining generally proved fruitless. At best, they preserved some jobs at lower wages. At worst, they lowered pay without any effect on the proportion of jobs that went to union workers. Union contractors profited from the reduced wages and nonunion builders followed suit. Since open shop employers typically set their wages in relation to the union scale, extensive concessions had the effect of reducing the standard of living of all construction workers, union and nonunion.

Union Response: Taking the Offensive

"We have made concession after concession, and every year we have been getting a smaller and smaller piece of the pie," Georgine remarked bitterly in a speech to a union contractors' association last year. His comments reflected a growing realization inside union halls that concessions had produced little or no gains in the union share of the construction job market. While the official desire to work hand-in-hand with union contractors has not diminished, there appears to be a shift in strategy to a more aggressive approach toward nonunion builders.

In the past few years, building trades unions have moved to reassert their traditional political clout and have experimented with a variety of tactics more often associated with the new breed of labor officials and organizers in the manufacturing and service sectors of the economy. High-powered legislative lobbying, increased political endorsements, the use of economic leverage,

corporate campaigns, and most importantly, a new orientation towards organizing are all now part and parcel of the standard rhetoric of building trades union leaders. Whether or not these approaches are used varies widely from union to union and region to region, but they are no longer foreign concepts.

Political Activity

Since the McGovern candidacy of 1972, the building trades unions have returned to the folds of the Democratic Party. Union PACs contribute heavily to local and national candidates who are most often identified with the moderate-to-liberal wing of the party. While top construction union officers still tend to support conservative foreign policies, sympathy to labor has far outpaced anti-Communism as the crucial litmus test for political support. President Ford's unexpected veto of the situs picketing bill in 1976 shocked the building trades leadership out of their complacent assumption that they could buttonhole friends in both Republican and Democratic corridors of power.

Priority items on the trades' legislative agenda now include safety issues, prevailing wage laws, and the elimination of double-breasting. The record is mixed. While labor lobbyists have, of necessity, been on the defensive in the Reagan years, construction unions have managed to fend off the most severe attacks on OSHA and the Davis-Bacon Act, and they may be closing in on Congress-



sional passage of an anti-double-breasting measure.

Pension Funds

The publication of Rifkin and Barber's *The North Will Rise Again* in 1978 alerted the labor movement to the untapped power of union pension funds. The lesson was not lost on construction unions.

Assigned to money managers and investment counselors, staggering sums—today nearly \$60 billion in the building trades alone—had been ignored in unsupervised investments. The frequent use of union pension funds to finance nonunion construction projects prompted Dennis Walton, business rep of Operating Engineers Local 675 in south Florida, to charge: "We've been loaning the bastards money to build us out of a job." The high degree of control exercised by unions in construction pension funds (far greater than unions have in other industries) offered the possibility of extensive economic leverage. With Walton paving the way, union funds in California, Massachusetts and a number of other areas across the country have financed construction projects built 100% union.

The Carpenters, for example, can now track the application of their pension funds across the country. Through a computerized system, they can identify financial institutions supported by the funds that may be involved in construction projects. As shareholders, they can legitimately raise concerns about job-site conditions. The Sheet Metal Workers have explored direct usage of their pension funds. Last year, they invested \$13 million in a photovoltaic panel manufacturing plant, on the assumption that solar technology will be the basis of future jobs for their membership.

The Carpenters Union in Massachusetts has taken a further step to control their financial affairs. Backed by their swelling pension and annuity funds, the Carpenters established the federally chartered First Trade Union Savings Bank in 1987. While federal laws set strict limits on banking policy, the bank can offer lenient loan guidelines to union members, and it plans to use bank capital to underwrite union-built affordable housing in Boston's minority community. This housing proposal parallels the highly successful entry of Boston's Bricklayers Union into the union-built affordable housing arena.

Corporate Campaigns

In 1985 the BCTD signed a project agreement to ensure that General Motors employed only union construction labor on its

Saturn plant in an area of Tennessee that was 95% nonunion. Chrysler accepted similar terms on a \$65 million electronic parts manufacturing facility in Alabama. When Toyota announced plans to erect an \$800 million factory in Georgetown, Kentucky, the BCTD moved to develop one more pact. Toyota ignored the union offer, prompting Georgine to opt for a strategy rarely employed in the building trades—the corporate campaign.

The 1986 campaign against Toyota targetted the automaker at a variety of vulnerable points. The BCTD ordered all local building trades unions to adopt a policy of noncooperation. Since many open shop contractors use some union labor on their projects (such as crane operators), this move eliminated a potential source of labor. The Kentucky Building Trades filed motions challenging the legality of aid granted to the project by the Kentucky legislature. In Washington, union legislative agents sought Congressional support to overturn tax law provisions helpful to Toyota. And, Building Trades Councils in a number of cities mobilized highly visible mass demonstrations.

The steady pressure produced an agreement after six months. In explaining the shift in policy, Ohbayashi, Toyota's construction manager, complained that its executives had spent more time fighting the corporate campaign than preparing to build the plant.

With the Toyota campaign successfully resolved, a California battle has assumed national prominence. For the last year and a half, construction workers in Contra Costa County have fought to overturn USS-POSCO's award of a \$350 million steel plant expansion to a nonunion contractor. The giant factory is the largest nonunion project in the history of California.

Particularly galling is the choice of contractor—BE&K. Not only is BE&K one of the nation's largest open shop builders and a spear-carrier for the ABC's anti-union vendetta; the company has also expanded outside the construction business to provide strikebreakers as a professional service to anti-union corporations. This modern-day Pinkerton maintains a computerized database of 5,000 workers who are experienced in crossing picket lines. International Paper's current vendetta against the Paperworkers Union has been bolstered by an army of replacement workers from BE&K.

The California campaign shows few signs of letting up. On March 19, 10,000 people rallied near the plant site. The demonstration elicited a much broader range of endorsements than the standard building trades "go-it-alone" activity. Marchers were recruited from a cross-section of AFL-CIO unions, and presidential candidate Jesse Jackson appeared as one of the principal speakers.

The corporate campaign strategy has taught the building trades unions important lessons in political organizing. A multi-pronged attack on an employer moves attention away from an exclusive focus on the workplace and inevitably brings organizers into contact with other interests and constituencies. The Carpenters, for example, have developed an ongoing alliance with the Paperworkers to coordinate activities against their common enemy, BE&K. And the decision to invite Jackson to the California rally is another important, if still unusual, step in moving out of the construction cocoon and into an arena with activists outside the labor movement. Many construction union officials are still profoundly uncomfortable in issue-oriented coalitions, but a growing number realize that labor's general vulnerability makes new alliances imperative.

Organizing

At a 1977 convention, an AFL-CIO official remarked to a reporter that so little organizing took place in construction that "if you ask the 17 unions how to do it, you will get 17 different answers." In the prosperous 1950s and 1960s, union leaders ignored trades workers outside their ranks, preferring to assure relatively stable employment through limits on membership size.

Whatever organizing did occur was of the "top-down" variety—that is, convincing employers to sign a union contract. Bottom-up organizing, a brand of organizing that is routine in other industries, was abandoned. While many people in the rest of the labor movement readily assume the trades had never organized the unorganized, in fact it was standard practice among the founding fathers of building trades unionism. John Cogill, an early Carpenters business agent, spoke for the vast majority of early Brotherhood leaders when he said in 1912: "every man that works with carpenters' tools must be brought into the union."

The official attachment to top-down organizing and the reluctance to embrace bottom-up organizing cannot be simply attributed to post-war complacency. Organizing in construction is very difficult. Unlike potential bargaining units permanently ensconced in factory or office settings, a typical building employer's workforce is small and transient. Tradespeople shift from site to site, company to company, and city to city. Even on the largest sites, a full-blown organizing campaign with card-signings and NLRB elections would almost invariably take longer than the life of the project.

There is another reason that building trades officials, particularly on the local level, resist grassroots organizing. Given the economic

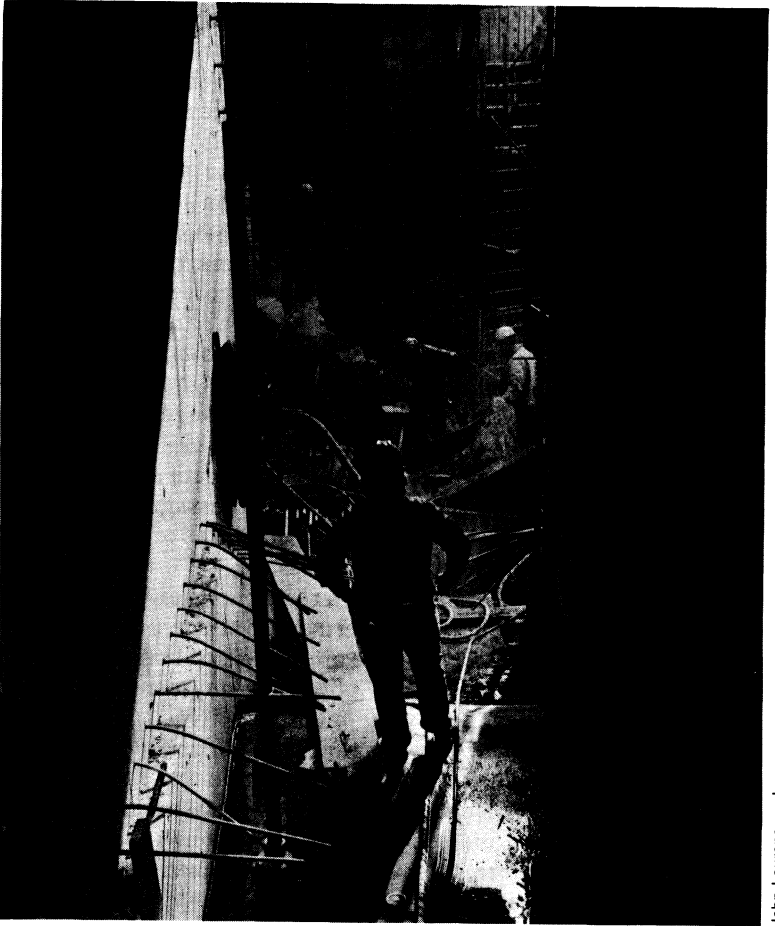
insecurity of construction, rank-and-file union members hesitate to welcome unlimited numbers of new members. In an industry with no provisions for seniority, older union members frequently conclude that restricting membership is the only road to job protection.

As understandable as the restrictive point of view may be, it has proved disastrously counterproductive in the current era of the open shop. Many qualified nonunion trades workers know the building trades unions only as institutions that have barred them. Thus, even the local unions that muster the courage to mount genuine bottom-up organizing campaigns must overcome hostility from the people they hope to organize. "You don't want me, you just want the work" is a standard comment hurled at building trades organizers. Given their limited bottom-up organizing experience and lukewarm membership backing, few organizers are able to overcome both nonunion worker skepticism and union member fears while waging a difficult campaign against an anti-union employer.

A number of unions have beefed up organizing departments in their national offices. Joint efforts, such as Atlanta's Project Phoenix, represent a shift from joint labor-management initiatives to strictly union-based programs. At a rally in 1983 in Atlanta, Michael Lucas, organizing director of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), told 700 assembled trades workers that their unions need to "turn back the clock" and "take a look at what the people did who built our unions."

Lucas is the most widely known advocate of grassroots organizing within the building trades, but other unions are making similar efforts. The Carpenters are beginning to experiment with the bottom-up approach by targetting nonunion carpenters in selected areas. In some areas, the Sheet Metal Workers require apprentices to spend one year after graduation as union organizers. These programs may all be in their infancy, but they offer hopeful new directions.

The jury is still out. Supporters and opponents can each point to examples of success and failure to bolster their positions. The truth is that until grassroots organizing is given the same kind of resources and political commitment expended on other initiatives, its potential will be unknown. What is clear is that decades of closed doors and restrictive regulations have not prevented a devastating weakening of construction unions. They have, on the other hand, bred hostility among nonunion trades workers, minorities, and other groups who have been the victims of exclusionary union policies.



John Laursen, Jr.

Organizing the Future

The future direction of the trades rests on organizing the new workforce. If no major changes occur in the near future, union members can reasonably expect to continue to account for one-third of the construction dollar. The vast nonunion workforce will remain outside the ranks of unionism unless a more aggressive direction is plotted.

Successful organizing will require a combination of top-down and bottom-up organizing. The traditional approach should not be eliminated. Union advocates can still point to the advantages available to contractors using union labor—the high level of skills,

greater productivity, and the large pool of experienced labor. However, a strategy based solely on wooing contractors will never appreciably dent the open shop movement, a group of employers that has powerful ideological as well as economic reasons to resist unionism.

Unionism must be brought directly to the workforce. But bottom-up campaigns will require some major adjustments for union officials. They will have to recognize that the psychology and work experience of nonunion trades workers, particularly the younger ones, may be different than that of present union members.

The feeling of craft pride and a sense that union membership was a badge of craft competence were once the glue that bonded organized craftsmen. These appeals will no longer function as effectively with a body of workers who are less skilled and semi-industrial in nature. Organizers now have to operate in an industry in transition and therefore must tailor their messages to workers with widely differing levels of skills, expectations of job security, and long-term commitment to the industry.

Construction unions need to loosen restrictions and crack open their doors. This applies to the internal life of the union as well as outside. Since business agents are often in a position of referring workers to jobs, their political power is augmented by the economic control they hold over members' lives. As a result, internal democracy has not always flourished in post-war building trades unionism. This has had the effect of reducing participation in union activities and creating a large body of members who pay dues as a *pro forma* matter. Successful bottom-up organizing depends, to some degree, on an effective mobilization of existing members as resources for and supporters of union campaigns.

Outside the union hall, the building trades have to continue to close ranks with the rest of the labor movement and build coalitions beyond. It will take joint efforts with community, minority, women's and civic organizations to tap the residual pro-labor sympathies tarnished by the building trades unions' exclusionary reputation. The alternative is the permanent acceptance of the present equilibrium—or worse.

In a recent ABC advertising supplement, Charles Brown of DuPont and the Business Roundtable looked back at the last 20 years: "The construction industry was monopolized by the union segment with no apparent alternative in sight. Fortunately for all of us, the capitalistic system worked again. 'Free market' forces prevailed."

In fact, the open shop has not yet prevailed. It has, however,

redefined the nature of the industry and the role of unions in it. The future position of labor organizations in the building trades rests on union willingness to shed outdated assumptions and practices, to reassess the new conditions that operate in the industry, and to exchange a policy of exclusion for one of inclusion. ■

Slab on Grade

*At dawn the concrete trucks
are already there: revving their engines,
rumbling and throbbing, one by one
maneuvering into position.*

*Enormous insects,
on command
they ooze from their huge revolving abdomens
a thick grey slime.*

*Insects attending to insects,
the crew fusses over them, nursing wet concrete
into the forms.*

*Someone to handle the chute,
a couple laborers mucking, one pulling mesh, and two
finishers working the screed rod—
this is called pouring
slab on grade.*

*What could be flatter or more nondescript
than a concrete slab?
For years people will walk on it,
hardly considering that it was put there
on purpose,
on a Thursday in August
by men no one knows.*

Clem Starch

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