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## **Skyscrapers, Building Trades Councils, and the Rise of the Structural Building Trades Alliance**

Even with the advantages of every modern tool and technological device, skyscrapers are still the work of human hands.

—George H. Douglas, *Skyscrapers: A Social History of the Very Tall Building in America*

**W**hen Chicago's Home Insurance Building opened for business in the fall of 1885, there were no fireworks, no parades, not even a newspaper headline to mark the occasion. At the time nobody recognized the ten-story high-rise as an architectural wonder or realized that major change was under way. In fact, as far as the newspapers were concerned, there was "nothing particularly new in the style of Chicago architecture" that season.<sup>1</sup>

But there was something new in its structure that would reshape city skylines for years to come: The Home Insurance Building was the first to employ steel skeleton construction, an innovation that would transform the building industry from the bottom up. In conventional construction, brick and stone walls strengthened a structure; in the new high-rise, cast-iron columns and rolled steel beams carried the load. Although the public was far more interested in the marble entryway and impressive columns of the new building, it was this shift from masonry to structural steel that set the Home Insurance Building apart. Skeleton construction, and subsequent innovations like high-speed elevators, electric motors, and steam-heating systems, would give rise to what one builder called "the most distinctively American thing in the world": steel frame skyscrapers that towered over the nation's

landscape by the 1930s, symbolizing the “swaggering vitality of American technology.” That they could be erected more quickly, and more profitably, than conventional masonry buildings, and vastly increased the value of rentable space, only added to their allure.<sup>2</sup>

However, it would have been hard to predict this outcome in 1885. The Home Insurance Building may have launched a revolution in building construction, but the industry that erected it was strictly a local, hand-powered affair at the time. Certainly there were factories producing windows, doors, and other building parts by the 1880s, but men, not machines, did most of the work in construction. Carpenters still carved ornate moldings or fashioned beams, pillars, and other heavy work. Stone cutters used chisels and hammers, and worked on site. Laborers did their own heavy lifting. Painters, plasterers, bricklayers, roofers, and tile setters all worked by hand. In those days they were employed by small, unincorporated, and highly competitive contractors whose lives were not so different from their own. Both moved from job to job, scrambling for steady income. And neither qualified as “gentlemen.” Contractors and tradesmen tended to be immigrants who started out as apprentices, a pattern not at all unusual. Any competent mechanic with a little money and experience could set up shop as a contractor, making the industry “an open door for small producers to try their luck,” as one economist put it.<sup>3</sup>

But the door could swing both ways. It did not take much to put a contractor out of business and a mechanic out of work, especially in a seasonal industry like construction, where short-term contracts and meager profits were the rule. A spell of bad weather, an unexpected rise in prices or interest rates, a business depression all could spell disaster. Marginal “shoestring” contractors, determined to stay afloat one way or another, aggravated the problem. Notorious for cutting prices in order to win contracts during the busy season, they undermined wage rates and, in the process, alienated the city’s best workers. Skilled, reliable, “decent” mechanics expected to earn “decent” wages, enough to feed and house their families well, and to educate their children. Employers who could not, or would not, pay such rates did not belong in business, they believed. “When a man is mean enough to try to crush our trade at every opportunity, I say *crush him* in every legal way in our power,” one carpenter argued in 1881. “One grand union must be formed” to get the job done, he urged fellow workers, “and that is a union of all the trades.”<sup>4</sup>

### **General Strikes, Walking Delegates, and Building Trades Councils**

This carpenter’s words were harsh, but his idea was becoming more popular. In an age of ten-hour days, subsistence wages, and virtually no protec-

tion, the idea of organizing an army of labor and the vision of achieving justice through general strikes and boycotts were truly inspiring. But how to make those ideas and visions real was another question. After all, even workers within a single trade had trouble cooperating with one another. The tendency in the 1880s, and well beyond, was to stick to your own kind. Skilled carpenters as a group all faced the problem of piece work, for instance; thanks to improvements in woodworking machinery, semiskilled specialists were flooding the market. Yet in cities throughout the country German speakers formed one trade group, English speakers another, and “Hebrews” and Scandinavians were each off on their own, a pattern that was common in the building trades.<sup>5</sup>

Nor was there any guarantee that individuals within these trade groups would agree on strategies or ultimate goals. Some believed that controlling entrance to the trade offered the best protection to skilled mechanics, and they favored craft unions that focused strictly on improving wages and working conditions. Others promoted broader labor reform groups, like the Knights of Labor, which welcomed skilled and unskilled workers with the motto, “an injury to one is the concern of all.” Still others supported the recently organized American Federation of Labor, which recognized craft autonomy but urged trade unions to work together on common issues like the eight-hour day in order to achieve success. And finally there were socialists, who believed that political power was the key to social justice, and anarchists, who were willing to do whatever it took to undermine an unfair labor system. But despite all the energy and excitement these various activists expressed, they represented only a small fraction of the workforce. So under the circumstances, it would be no easy task to build “a union of all the trades” and almost impossible to win a general strike in the 1880s.<sup>6</sup>

Consider the case of Chicago’s carpenters, who struck for the \$3 day at the start of the 1884 season. At first, the most skilled carpenters won their raise without a fight, proving their economic value to the contractors. But their victory was short-lived, thanks to a slowdown in the national economy. As work dried up around the country, the city was soon flooded with carpenters willing to work for less. The local union then called for a general strike to save the raise, but the plan could not be tested. The bricklayers’ union, the best organized trade in the city, refused to join the fight. A very practical, survival-oriented group, the bricklayers were willing to contribute \$500 to the cause—a remarkable sum that demonstrated the strength of their organization. But they were not willing to jeopardize their own hard-won conditions by striking on the carpenters’ behalf. After all, they had battled their own contractors a year before without any outside help. And since union bricklayers regularly collected funds for their own protection through a system of high dues and initiation fees, they believed that their decision was jus-

tified. Although the carpenters blamed them for the demise of the carpenters' union, the bricklayers did not consider themselves responsible.<sup>7</sup>

The lesson was not lost on building tradesmen. If they learned anything from the failed strike in 1884, it was the value of controlling their work. For as the bricklayers demonstrated, skill, discipline, and a well-financed organization got results in the building industry. With a long history of organization—the bricklayers' national union dated back to 1865, and some locals were older than that—they did not look to others to win their fights. And they also left nothing to chance. The first of the building trades to establish the closed shop, collective bargaining, and the nine-hour day (which would soon be the eight-hour day in Chicago), the bricklayers were also the first to employ business agents, or walking delegates, to ensure that only union men worked on a job and that contractors honored their agreements. "The Bricklayers' Union has got the bosses' noses to the grindstone," the *Chicago Tribune* noted in 1884, and as long as the work was running, the paper added, "there is no way out of it."<sup>8</sup>

The bricklayers' ability to go it alone may have enraged other trades, but by the mid-1880s their methods were gaining respect. In fact, as the skyscraper boom began to take off, impressively boosting the industry in Chicago and New York City, business agents were collecting dues, keeping the books, and enforcing work rules for more and more unions. And they were getting results, much to the contractors' dismay. The new symbol of power in the building trades, business agents were authorized to "pull a job," or order strikes, when necessary to keep contractors in line. Elected and paid by union members, their jobs depended on getting results, putting a premium on tough, aggressive, business agents who would not take no for an answer. Threatened by this unexpected challenge, contractors equated business agents with gangsters, warning that unless they were reined in quickly, "business would be ruined and the triumph of the walking delegate would be complete."<sup>9</sup>

At the time, however, industrial expansion was on the side of the tradesmen, at least in Chicago and New York City, where business agents were beginning to pool their strength in local building trades councils. New York City's Board of Walking Delegates was established in 1884, and within six years every union but the Bricklayers (which had its own arbitration agreement with employers) had joined. Chicago's first attempt to form a council in 1886 was not as successful, although here the Bricklayers did offer moral support (which meant "the dropping of a brick upon the head of an unwary nonunion workman," according to the press).<sup>10</sup> But in 1890, when the Chicago Building Trades Council (BTC) was launched, every organized trade was a member. Led by a Board of Business Agents, Chicago's BTC was designed to remove "all unjust and injurious competition" through "unity of

action for mutual protection.” In other words, it would use the power of the sympathetic strike to police the industry: Unions that joined the BTC would honor the strikes of other BTC members to ensure that work went to “fair” contractors who paid union rates and observed union rules. The practical incarnation of “a union of all the trades,” these councils equalized the strength of local unions, encouraged labor solidarity, and harnessed the workers’ power in the industry, allowing them to flex their economic muscle one building at a time. In the period between 1886 and 1890, for instance, before the founding of Chicago’s BTC, building trades unions lost more strikes than they won. In the period between 1890 and 1894, however, victories increased steadily, reaching 85 percent in 1894.<sup>11</sup>

Building trades councils owed their existence to a host of factors, including the burst of labor activity in the late 1880s that gave rise to the national eight-hour movement. But the fact that they took off around the same time as skyscrapers was not a coincidence. The two were linked by economics: In the high-stakes world of skyscraper erection, time was money and competence mattered. “Skyscrapers always called for the best that was available in any given pool of labor,” one student of the industry explained. Since steel frame construction required a greater investment of capital, for equipment and material, contractors needed first-class workers if they hoped to turn a profit, workers who could anticipate and resolve problems on the spot. For instance, when contractor W. A. Starrett faced a costly delay early in his career, when a derrick toppled over, he depended on his riveting foreman, Sam Parks, to bail him out. With the mast of the derrick broken, Parks worked all night to improvise a new hauling system, incorporating the upper floors of a building next door as a makeshift mast—an ingenious solution that saved the day for Starrett. An expert rigger, who had the respect of the men who worked under him, Parks would eventually rise to the head of New York City’s Board of Delegates, where he would master and then exploit the strategy of the sympathetic strike. But when he worked for Starrett, he was a good example of the kind of worker who made the building trades union an economic power in the industry: He could get the job done right, the first time.<sup>12</sup>

His union, the International Association of Bridgemen and Structural Iron Workers, grew up with steel frame construction, and members who worked on skyscrapers were a breed apart; a cross between mechanics and daredevils, they riveted girders and trusses high atop a building’s structure as fearlessly as if they worked on the ground. These “cowboys of the skies” drew public attention as they strode along high narrow beams, working without a net. In their case, nerve was the larger part of skill. In other trades it was efficient, flawless work. Brick walls encasing steel structures had to be watertight and able to withstand years of punishing weather, and roofs and cornices also had to stand the test of time. As skyscrapers grew taller, pipe fitters had

to have practical knowledge of hydraulics and pneumatics, and elevators had to be dependable and safe. Electrical work had to be expertly done to prevent fire hazards, a high standard to meet at the turn of the twentieth century, when electrical wiring was still in its infancy. Because a building trades worker had to be “first class or he is of little use,” as one organizer put it, building trades unions took skill seriously. The best organized trades trained apprentices, used their union journals to publish expert discussions of technical matters, and expected new members to pass technical exams, especially if they intended to work in high-wage cities. These early efforts to control entrance to the trades paid off, putting building trades unions in a good position to bargain.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Rise of the National Building Trades Council**

Even that process was changing, however, as skyscrapers revitalized the industry. For as steel replaced wood and stone as primary building materials, and steel erectors began to dominate commercial construction, regional and even national contracting companies were entering the business. Men like George A. Fuller, who built Chicago’s 1889 skyscraper, the Tacoma, before entering the market in New York City, typified the change. An engineer who oversaw every phase of the business, including financing and materials, Fuller was “a new type of contractor” determined to control expenses and increase profits through careful administration. By the time he died in 1900, general contractors were playing major roles in the industry: They financed the project, purchased and assembled materials, hired craftsmen for foundation, masonry, steel, and carpentry work, and supervised the entire project from beginning to end. In New York City, which was rapidly taking Chicago’s place as the high-rise capital of the world, about half a dozen large companies (including the Fuller Company) erected the majority of the city’s skyscrapers. And most of these were willing to work with building trades unions, if that was necessary to get a job done. “We favor these companies,” a walking delegate explained, “because they’re fair. It’s not so much that the wages and conditions are better as that they don’t try to sneak out of agreements.”<sup>14</sup>

However, reaching agreements was getting harder to do: As skyscrapers (and expenses) continued to rise, general contractors began to introduce new building materials and new methods of installation that often crossed traditional trade lines. Building trades councils, which operated in most larger cities by 1897, generally policed a trade’s control of work (or trade jurisdiction), but the job was getting complicated. The basic shift from masonry to steel construction, and from wood to metal doors, window frames, and trim (a safety precaution dating back to the 1870s) was shaking up the



trades. Who should install these accessories? Carpenters who had always done so? Sheet metal workers who manufactured them? Iron workers? At the same time, the evolution of steel frame construction created entirely new categories of workers, from hoisting engineers who controlled power and delivered materials, to elevator constructors who made “vertical transportation” possible. New questions were also raised. Who controlled the job of wiring electric elevators? Elevator constructors or electricians? And who handled the elevators after they were built? Hoisting engineers or elevator constructors? Finally, new materials were straining trade relations, too. When contractors introduced reinforced concrete as a cheaper alternative to brick and stone work, bricklayers tried to restrict its use, arguing that concrete was unstable, an argument that lost its force in 1904 when the first concrete skyscraper opened for business. But by that time bricklayers, plasterers, and a new union of cement finishers were vying to do the work, while iron workers, lathers, sheet metal workers, and laborers all claimed the right to install metal reinforcing rods.<sup>15</sup>

It was one thing for local unions to defend their jurisdictional rights on the floor of the building trades council. It was quite another to force general contractors to honor their claim on a job site. Sympathy strikes to enforce jurisdictional claims, or to restrict the use of new materials or tools, raised issues more complicated than merely shutting work down. Should the trades unite behind the Stone Cutters’ efforts to outlaw the use of the mechanical stone planer, for instance? Or should new workers using these tools be organized? And if they were organized, should they form their own “specialty” union, or were they part of the established trade? Changes in the plumbing industry posed a similar problem. Should building trades councils support the Plumbers’ claim to steam fitting as an auxiliary trade, or should they stand by the more recently organized Steam Fitters union? The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBCJA) also kept local councils busy. Did its members have a “vested interest” in work that was once done in wood, as the union claimed? And was it worthwhile to back the UBCJA fight against a rival union, the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters, that had already torn New York City’s Board of Delegates apart? And what about the Painters? In that case, rival eastern and western factions had been testing each other’s strength since 1894, wrecking local councils in the process. The Bricklayers union wanted no part of these fights and urged local unions to steer clear of building trades councils. But other trades saw no future in going it alone.<sup>16</sup>

Determined to find a permanent solution to these ongoing fights, a group of building trades leaders from midwestern cities—including Chicago, Milwaukee, Toledo, St. Louis, and Kansas City, Missouri—decided it was time to get together and talk. According to Herman W. Steinbiss, a St. Louis

painter, they were inspired by the success of the St. Louis BTC in establishing an arbitration system that prevented strikes and encouraged “a more friendly feeling between employers and employe.” Gathering in St. Louis in 1897, delegates representing local councils, international unions, and independent local unions organized the National Building Trades Council (NBTC) to encourage the formation of local councils and unions, enforce the eight-hour day, equalize wages between the trades, and secure a mechanics’ lien law and other beneficial legislation. Led by president Ed Carroll (an officer of the Plasterers international union who was also president of Chicago’s BTC) and secretary-treasurer Steinbiss, the new organization intended to establish a national working card, a correspondence league to improve trade relations, and a system to “adjust differences in our own ranks” without outside interference. There would be no jurisdictional strikes, the NBTC proclaimed. All differences would be settled “off the work” either by committees representing the trades in dispute or, if that failed, by the NBTC governing board. In the meantime, the men would continue to work “refraining from outward show of antagonism,” for the NBTC’s ultimate goal was the “closer amalgamation of building trades workmen.” According to Steinbiss, who would emerge as the strongest promoter of the NBTC, the new organization would prove to be “a powerful aid” to the American Federation of Labor, and a “powerful factor in unionizing the building trades all over the land.”<sup>17</sup>

The international unions were not so sure. Although building trades councils welcomed the new organization, only the Painters, Plasterers, Electrical Workers, and Steam Fitters offered strong support. The other building trades unions were wary of the NBTC’s emphasis on local authority. Because local councils held the balance of power in NBTC conventions (both local councils and international unions got one vote each), they also had the power to set policy and decide trade disputes. Thus trade jurisdiction would vary from city to city, depending on the strength of a local union, regardless of international union claims or trade agreements. “In other words, the affairs of the council as they affected the affiliated internationals were disposed of by representatives of local bodies,” one opponent explained. As far as he could see, international unions had no real function in the NBTC except “to bear the expense.”<sup>18</sup>

The NBTC’s policy of encouraging “specialty” trades to organize new unions likewise kept the Bricklayers, Granite Cutters, Plumbers, and Carpenters officially on the sidelines (although carpenters’ locals were permitted to join and actually played a strong role in the new organization). NBTC efforts to strengthen building trades councils did not suit these unions either, especially since local councils often backed so-called dual or independent local unions that would not, or could not, join the international union.

When NBTC officers tried to compel local unions to join local building trades councils, for instance, the Bricklayers made it clear, in 1898, that the new organization had gone too far.<sup>19</sup>

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was not enthusiastic either. In fact, at the very time the NBTC was meeting in St. Louis, AFL officers were protesting the new organization. The problem was not that building trades workers wanted to legislate for themselves, insisted AFL president Samuel Gompers. In 1888 he had suggested that very idea himself. But an organization like the NBTC, which strengthened local power at the expense of international union discipline, was not part of his plan. Gompers wanted building trades workers to organize councils, but he expected those councils to be part of the AFL. Convinced that the NBTC would only invite rivalry and increase strife, he steadfastly opposed it. Backing him up in 1899, delegates to the AFL convention declared the NBTC a dual organization, which made it “unfair,” or illegitimate. At the same time they urged local building trades unions to affiliate with city central labor unions, the AFL’s voice in the local community, and establish separate building trades sections within these councils.<sup>20</sup>

This action effectively checked the growth of the NBTC: Although the organization survived until at least 1907, it was never strong enough to enforce trade decisions or to erect a national network of building trades councils. But AFL-approved central labor union building trades sections could not do the job either. Bricklayers, for instance, were crucial to building trades strength since they were one of the first trades on a job. But the Bricklayers union was not a member of the AFL at the time, and it wanted nothing to do with central labor unions or building trades sections. Like most building trades unions, the Bricklayers did not want the “miscellaneous” trades in a central labor organization to interfere with building trades affairs. As a consequence, however, jurisdictional claims still varied from city to city, and sympathetic strikes to enforce these claims continued to disrupt the industry.

### **The Rise of the Structural Building Trades Alliance**

The contest grew so intense that in 1903 strikes or lockouts shut down construction in nearly every organized city, seriously damaging the reputation of building trades councils. The image of iron-fisted council leaders, like Sam Parks in New York City and “Skinny” Madden in Chicago, revived the 1886 complaint that walking delegates were “blackmailers” bent on ruling or ruining the industry. Their supporters in the ranks did not fare much better. Critics inside and outside the labor movement were outraged when high-

priced trades “built a wall” around their locals, charging high initiation fees or even “closing the books” to new members, including union brothers from out of town. Complaints grew loudest in Chicago, where local contractors and material manufacturers signed exclusive agreements with building trades unions to keep local industry in local hands, thus putting a brand new spin on the concept of solidarity. “Collective bargaining became a tool for the joint control of competition,” one student of Chicago’s industry explained. “National firms . . . desiring access to the nation’s second largest market, were forced to conform or disappear.”<sup>21</sup>

Or they could organize, of course. In 1899 a group of contractors, bankers, architects, and material manufacturers established the Building Contractors Council (BCC). Backed by a variety of corporate interests, the BCC was determined to win control of the industry by locking out building trades unions until they agreed to dissolve their council. This was not an easy task in a union town like Chicago. The mayor, for instance, did not order police to protect the contractors’ new (nonunion) workers, which meant that both sides fought it out on the streets. Newspapers reported some 250 cases of assault during the first five months of the lockout.<sup>22</sup>

Such dramatic evidence of deep-rooted conflict drew the attention of the U.S. Industrial Commission, a fact-finding government agency that sent investigators to take testimony from participants on both sides. The publicity that resulted, however, backfired on the unionists, according to George Perkins, a labor leader with strong ties to the AFL. “The Contractors seized the opportunity and made the Commission a means through which . . . trades unions were unmercifully flayed and their officials vilified,” he informed Samuel Gompers. “Everything that the Contractors said against Labor or labor organizations or labor officials, was freely and fully chronicled in the Chicago daily press, while the manly, dignified and flat denials on the part of labor officials and Union men were entirely ignored.” His hopes were still strong for the Chicago Building Trades Council, he added, but “my judgment . . . leads me to say that the unions involved in the building trades lock-out . . . are in a somewhat critical condition.”<sup>23</sup>

That was putting it mildly. With more than fifty thousand men out of work, and strike funds running low, many unions had no choice but to make separate agreements with contractors, and by April 1901 the Building Contractors Council had won the fight: New agreements included the so-called Cardinal Principles that banned exclusive agreements and union restrictions on the amount of work a man might do, the introduction of machinery or new materials, or the number of apprentices. New agreements also prohibited unions from joining building trades councils or participating in sympathetic strikes; contractors wanted conflicts settled through arbitration boards, but they were not always able to enforce the rules. “They say they’ve

abandoned sympathetic strikes in Chicago,” one union president told a reporter. “So they have. They’re all ‘individual walkouts’ now.” Another Chicago unionist agreed that since the sympathetic strike was “practically abolished” the men now walked out as individuals to help fellow tradesmen, “without orders from headquarters, of course.” If Chicago’s building trades workers proved to be better organized than contractors at the time—by 1903 another trades council was on the rise, but the contractors’ council was on its way out—this was a devastating defeat nonetheless.<sup>24</sup>

But the problem was not confined to Chicago. “If these sympathetic strikes continue,” a contractor in New York City predicted in 1902, “we’re going to have another ‘Chicago lockout.’” He apparently knew what he was talking about, for by June 1903 New York City’s building industry was at a standstill. The trouble began when ten thousand carpenters struck a rival union, generating a sympathetic strike that tied up half the buildings in the city. Around the same time the Board of Delegates admitted two unions of building teamsters, stipulating that these unions would now handle all building supplies. This move was designed to organize the rest of the industry, since teamsters would deliver material only to “fair” union employers. Material dealers refused to comply; instead, they shut down their yards and promised not to reopen until the Board expelled the teamsters unions. Backed by some thirty trade associations, employers declared a general lockout, putting one hundred thousand men out of work. “We are not opposed to labor unions so long as they are fairly and justly managed,” a spokesman explained. “But of late the exactions of this union and of that union have become so oppressive that many of us honestly prefer to close our shops and retire from business rather than continue as we have been doing.” Pledging to “stand for the right of the employer to manage his own business,” they organized the Building Trades’ Employers’ Association (BTEA), a federation of trade associations designed to abolish sympathetic strikes, eliminate jurisdictional disputes, and reduce the power of walking delegates, or at least “throw their ringleaders into jail,” as one reporter put it. They were not trying to destroy unionism, the BTEA insisted, since contractors still depended on unions to supply skilled labor. They were merely trying to keep the sides even, they maintained.<sup>25</sup>

Their plan rested on settling disputes through a board of arbitration whose members would be “neither business agents nor members of any central body of employees.” But what the BTEA considered “a new constitution for the building trades,” sounded more like “a one-sided business” to building trades leaders, one calculated to blunt the union’s economic power in the industry. When the vast majority voted to table the BTEA plan, union leaders assumed that the matter was settled, since they did not believe that large construction companies, like the Fuller Company, would come to the plan’s

defense. They were disappointed, however. The Fuller Company not only shut down work, but the BTEA organized its own unions, a move that pushed the unions to fight back. Ignoring the employers' ultimatum to accept the arbitration plan or be replaced, they declared a citywide strike. "Resume work and we will talk over the plan," union leaders offered. "Sign our arbitration plan," employers countered, "and then we will resume work." After a deadlock of some three weeks, a joint conference was finally arranged, and after achieving some compromises, the majority of unions signed on to the plan and went back to work.<sup>26</sup>

Sam Parks and his supporters, a force of about fifteen unskilled unions including the teamsters, would not give in. But by this time their defiance made almost no difference. With most of the skilled trades back at work, Parks's army had no real power. More important, however, Parks was on his way out as a building trades leader. Embroiled in a losing fight with steel erectors, he was also convicted of extortion in 1903 after contractors testified that they had paid him to prevent strikes. The story made all the papers; in fact, before the year was out, "Parksism" was another name for graft.<sup>27</sup>

However, in an industry that thrived on collusion—in the form of exclusive agreements between material manufacturers, building contractors, and unions—the sin Parks committed was hardly original. It was just the cost of doing business, his supporters believed, and it was strictly his own affair. If he made "a bunch of money," as one iron worker put it, "he did not get it out of us." On the contrary, his iron-fisted, aggressive leadership had won New York City's building trades workers the highest average wages in the country. But those days were over now. By the time Parks died in Sing Sing Prison in 1904, the contractors' arbitration plan was in full force, walking delegates had lost their power, and the industry was primed for something new. "The lesson of this epidemic of sympathetic strikes and lockouts is, that the building trades must be considered as a single industry," one reporter noted, "and that their labor problem must be treated as a single problem, not as a problem of thirty different trades. Both capital and labor must be organized and a constitution must be provided for the trade."<sup>28</sup>

It seemed to be an idea whose time had come. Indeed, in the summer of 1903, at the same time New York City's industry was fighting it out, building trades unions were searching for new solutions. Frank Duffy, secretary-treasurer of the Carpenters, was particularly fed up with the state of affairs. However he blamed jurisdictional conflicts on the American Federation of Labor, not on walking delegates: The Carpenters had been fighting rivals like the Amalgamated Carpenters and Amalgamated Wood Workers for years, and Duffy strongly resented the AFL's willingness to accept these unions as members. Their membership as well as their work rightly belonged to the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, as far as Duffy could see. De-

terminated to force the AFL to act, he began corresponding with Herman Steinbiss, secretary of the National Building Trades Council, to investigate whether the Carpenters would be better served by joining the rival federation. Ultimately the Carpenters decided against that move, since the NBTC was still heavily weighted in favor of local councils. But since he found the idea of a federation of building trades unions intriguing, Duffy issued a call to union officers to meet in Indianapolis to discuss the plan. When representatives of the six largest unions—the Bricklayers, Carpenters, Painters, Iron Workers, Laborers, and Plumbers—met in August, they agreed that it was time to develop a central organization of amalgamated building trades unions, designed to face the challenge of rapid technological change by avoiding the pitfalls of jurisdictional conflicts.<sup>29</sup>

According to NBTC veteran Michael P. Carrick of the Painters, the new organization intended to prevent the rise of dual unions, keep control of jurisdiction in the hands of the men involved, and establish an “allied force” of building trades unions to improve conditions without resorting to strikes. It also intended to work in harmony with the American Federation of Labor, he hastened to inform Samuel Gompers. “We did not meet with the intention of interfering with the A. F. of L. as the men . . . one and all, believe that the American Federation of Labor is doing good work for the cause of labor in general,” Carrick informed him. Specifically, however, the building trades unions thought that more could be done on their behalf. “We felt by getting our forces together we could induce the A. F. of L. to give some attention to building trades matters.”<sup>30</sup>

Infuriated by this comment, Gompers immediately sent the letter on to the AFL Executive Council, along with a list of AFL actions to prove Carrick wrong. First, he pointed out that the Bricklayers and Iron Workers were not even affiliated with the AFL. Then he made it clear that Gompers himself had organized the laborers’ international union, and that the AFL had raised funds for the Carpenters’ eight-hour strike, had worked hard to reunite the Painters, and was still assisting the Plumbers union in its fight against the Steam Fitters. So while he did not oppose “a National Building Trades Council or Section . . . in full loyalty to the American Federation of Labor,” as he told Executive Council members, Gompers was not at all persuaded that the men in Indiana truly intended to work in harmony with the AFL.<sup>31</sup>

Only time would tell. In the meantime, the Structural Building Trades Alliance, as the new organization was called, began to take shape. Meeting in Indianapolis once again a few months later, a broader delegation of Bricklayers, Carpenters, Electrical Workers, Engineers, Iron Workers, Laborers, Painters, Plasterers, and Plumbers hammered out a program to “arbitrate, adjudicate, and conduct building trades affairs.” Their initial decision to admit “none but the basic trades” as members proved controversial: It put

the SBTA firmly on the side of large, amalgamated unions, like the Bricklayers and the Carpenters, and against the specialty trades, like the Steam Fitters and Cement Workers. Specialty trades would have to join the “primary” union, if they wanted to be part of this new organization. Delegates also made it clear that international unions would govern labor affairs; in fact, building trades councils had no official voice in the new organization. Delegates also endorsed arbitration boards (but promised sympathetic support if no agreement could be reached), pledged to work in harmony with both the AFL and the NBTC, and agreed that dual unions should be annihilated, if not prevented. Finally, they drafted a constitution that gave centralized power to a Board of Governors: The SBTA’s president, secretary-treasurer, and eight vice presidents would make final decisions on all trade matters, including jurisdiction, based “on the principle of the strict trade vote.”<sup>32</sup>

Confident that the hardest decisions were behind them, delegates elected a Board of Governors to lead building trades unions into a new era of national trade agreements, international union discipline, and centralized organization. George P. Gubbins, president of the Bricklayers union and a well-known leader in Chicago, was elected president. William Spencer, general organizer for the Plumbers and a Canadian immigrant, was elected secretary-treasurer. Seven vice presidents were also elected: J. G. Kavanaugh (Plasterers), Frank Buchanan (Iron Workers), Frank Duffy (Carpenters), Alexander Bainbridge (Painters), Herman Lillien (Laborers), James Hannah (Engineers), and W. J. French (Electricians). Election of the eighth vice president was postponed, however, until the SBTA decided whether the Granite Cutters, Marble Workers, or Stone Cutters constituted the “basic” trade. In the meantime, a special committee planned to meet the following week to finish drafting the constitution, which would then be submitted to the board for approval and sent out to affiliates for final ratification.<sup>33</sup>

There was nothing left to do but wait, or so it seemed at the time: The men in Indiana were confident that the Structural Building Trades Alliance was on the right track. By speaking in one authoritative voice, the new federation would prove to be “the most powerful labor body in any one line” of work, they believed.<sup>34</sup> And by setting up a strict chain of command, the SBTA would function as an integrated whole, ready and able to meet the challenge of organized employers head on. Their confidence in the fall of 1903 was inspiring; even the newspapers seemed to agree that the rise of the SBTA promised to solve the industry’s problems. Unfortunately they spoke too soon. Long before the constitution was even ratified, the ground began to shift. By the time the SBTA called its next convention to order, in 1904, leaders would be grappling with a hard fact of life: It was far easier for building trades workers to erect a skyscraper than it was to organize a “union of all the trades.”