

Building and Construction Trades Unions: Are They Built to Win?

By Jeff Grabelsky

The evidence of labor's declining power in the economic and political arenas is increasingly clear. Despite the tenacious efforts of talented leaders over the past ten years, the labor movement has still failed to turn the proverbial corner. Some labor leaders now believe that a dramatic change in strategic direction may be necessary to revitalize labor's fortunes. The emerging debate about labor's future touches every sector of the movement. The building and construction trades are no exception.

The debate should address strategy as well as structure, content as well as form. But in order to successfully change strategies it may be necessary to address a number of significant structural issues. The experience of the building and construction trades may provide a useful lens through which some of these structural issues can be more closely examined and rigorously debated.

With the overwhelming majority of the industry's workforce unionized throughout the 1950's and 60's, building trades unions enjoyed formidable bargaining power and unionized construction workers were among the highest paid blue collar workers in the world. But in the last 50 years, the building trades endured a precipitous decline, as union density in the construction industry fell from a high of over 80% immediately after World War II to less than 18% today. The diminished power and

presence of unions in the industry have meant that all construction workers – union and nonunion, alike – work harder, for less, under harsher conditions. In the last 30 years, wages have declined by about 25% in real dollars.

By the late 1980's, construction union leaders began confronting the challenges of a growing open shop

movement with a range of strategic initiatives designed to recapture lost markets, rebuild bargaining strength, and re-organize an increasingly nonunion industry. But despite the determined efforts of leaders at every level, union power has continued to erode. Building trades' unions retain a presence in a shrinking number of urban centers across the country and are not even "in the game" in important segments, like residential, and huge areas, like the South and Southwest. Building trades unionists cannot merely do what they have been doing – just harder and better. To organize at a

pace and scale necessary to definitively reverse the long-term trend of declining union density, they must conduct multi-union, coordinated campaigns that are massive in scope.

But there are at least four interrelated structural issues that have confounded efforts to revitalize the building and construction trades and may be relevant to the challenges facing other unions as well.

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There appears to be a mismatch between national union structures based on local affiliates that evolved in local markets, and the actual structure of the modern construction industry, which is increasingly dominated by regional and national contractors operating in regional and national markets.

There is a mismatch between the need for a coherent and coordinated organizing strategy among locals within the same national union and the enduring tradition of local autonomy evidenced in all building trades affiliates.

There may be a mismatch between the structure of the Building and Construction Trades Department and its 300 constituent councils – which are voluntary associations that lack the power and authority to conduct coordinated organizing campaigns – and the enormous challenge of unionizing a multi-billion dollar industry with over 5 million unrepresented workers.

There is a mismatch between the structure of the unionized sector of the industry, in which fifteen separate affiliates represent different but increasingly overlapping craft jurisdictions, and the dynamics of nonunion construction work, which now accounts for 80% of the industry and where traditional jurisdictional lines are neither reflected nor respected.

First, let's look at the mismatch between the internal

structure of individual affiliates and the actual structure of the construction industry. Historically, building trades locals were established in local construction markets where unions organized the local labor pool and local employers operating in those local markets. But the industry is increasingly characterized by regional, national and even global contractors whose operations are no longer confined to local markets. Virtually every local union confronts contractors who operate in multiple local jurisdictions; few locals possess the resources, capacity or strategic leverage to organize and bargain with the corporate builders who now dominate the industry.

National building trades unions have addressed this structural problem in a number of ways. Some have adjusted local contracts or negotiated national agreements to deal with the reality of regional and national contracts. Others have responded by merging local unions into larger, better resourced locals whose expanded geographic jurisdictions conform more closely to actual construction markets. For example, the Laborers have consolidated 32 New Jersey locals into 16 unions; the Sheet Metal Workers have consolidated 20 California locals into 5 unions. While the IBEW has also merged some of its local unions, President Ed Hill cautions that mergers may produce unintended consequences: the union may lose its presence in local communities and members may lose their sense of loyalty to their unions.

Several unions, including the Iron Workers, Painters, and Carpenters, have attacked this structural problem by creating regional councils that correspond to regional construction markets. In the Carpenters, President Doug McCarron has allowed local unions to maintain their essential identity, but the real power for organizing and bargaining has been transferred from local union officers to a powerful Executive Secretary-Treasurer at the regional council. In some areas, this restructuring – with the increased resources and capacity it generated – has yielded impressive results. For example, since it was established in 1996, the New England Regional Council of Carpenters – which covers six states – has built a diverse staff of about sixty organizers, many drawn from the rank and file; increased its membership from 22,000 to 26,500, or about 20%; organized over 900 contractors; leveraged its power in strong union markets like Boston to compel employers to sign contracts covering all six New England states; and increased its market share from 79% to 92% in the Boston area, and from 38% to 54% throughout New England.

But in some places the Carpenters' restructuring has also engendered deep resentment and a political backlash. Because local union members have lost some of their rights to vote for local union officers or to ratify collective bargaining agreements, many have joined a chorus of dissidents who criticize the undemocratic nature of the restructured organization. Whether these dissidents are driven by a genuine commitment to democracy or are motivated by resentment about having lost power and autonomy is the subject of some debate.

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The second structural issue that demands attention is the contradiction between the need for a common and coordinated organizing strategy within national unions and the enduring tradition of local union autonomy. Even if the jurisdiction of a local union matches the rough geography of a definable construction market, there is no guarantee that the local will develop a plan, build the capacity and execute a strategy to organize the unrepresented workers and unionize the nonunion contractors operating in that market. Obstacles to organizing – high initiation fees, restrictive entrance exams, referral procedures that disadvantaged newly

organized members, and others – have remained in place in many local unions. Some national unions have encouraged locals to “change-to-organize” and used innovative educational tools, like the COMET program, to persuade both local leaders and members of the need to organize. But when local leaders lacked the will or desire, they relied on the tradition of local autonomy to avoid the difficult challenge of organizing.

Iron Workers President Joe Hunt recently handled this issue in a novel way. To facilitate an innovative campaign to unionize mostly immigrant workers in the rebar industry, he chartered a new organizing local – Regional Local 846 – that successfully signed J.D. Steel, one of the largest contractors operating in several Southwestern states.

In some rare cases, recalcitrant local unions have been put in trusteeship or merged into other locals. In the IBEW, President Hill recently reclaimed the charter of Local 637, formerly based in Roanoke, Virginia, and divided its jurisdiction among locals in Washington, D.C. and West Virginia. This severe intervention was precipitated by the failure of Local 637 to enact a serious organizing program while the union's share of the local construction market shrank to about three percent.

Ed Hill was struggling with a dilemma that every national union president confronts. How can a leader drive a national organizing program, when the union's internal structure is built on and deferential to the tradition of the local autonomy? How can a union conduct a national

program in a disciplined and effective way without establishing and enforcing standards of accountability for its constituent local affiliates?

However difficult it may be for national unions to resolve this autonomy dilemma, it is even more challenging for the Building and Construction Trades Department and its state and local councils. Conducting the kind of coordinated campaigns needed to reorganize the construction industry requires the active and authentic participation of multiple, independent craft unions. Building trades councils – like the AFL-CIO department to which they are affiliated – are voluntary associations

that have not generally been able to achieve the level of unity and discipline required for such multi-union campaigns.

This is the third structural conundrum that confronts building trades leaders struggling to revitalize their movement. Each of the fifteen building trades affiliates would probably concede that they cannot individually organize their own craft in the nonunion industry and

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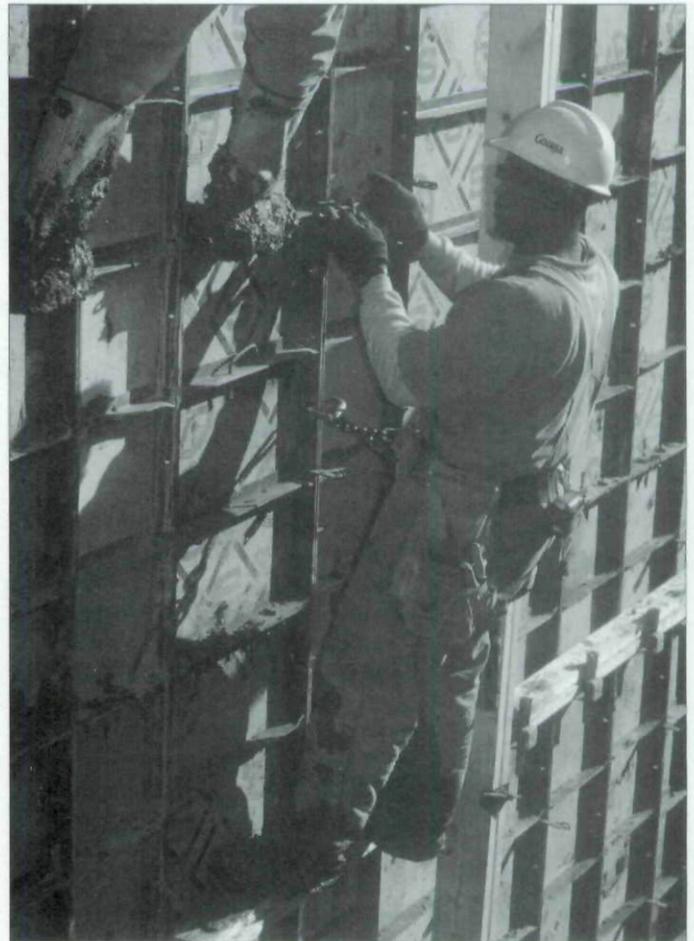
expect to survive as an island of strength in a sea of weakness. This recognition has fueled a number of multi-union organizing efforts in the construction industry in the last ten years. The most notable was the Building Trades Organizing Project (BTOP), which was conducted in Las Vegas, Nevada, between 1997 and 1999, during a building boom. This ambitious undertaking was informed by a grand scheme of cooperation and coordination among fifteen different affiliates and helped increase membership in the Las Vegas building trades from 18,820 to 25,400. But it was exceedingly difficult to devise a common organizing strategy that each affiliate pursued with equal fervor and dedication. At the end of the day, the voluntary nature of affiliate participation meant that each union ultimately chose its own path. In some cases, unions genuinely embraced the project's mission; the Roofers, for example, organized hundreds of unrepresented immigrant workers and unionized the largest open shop roofing company in the state. But in other cases, a rhetorical commitment to organizing was not reflected in real world activity and some affiliates abandoned the project when it was convenient to do so. The voluntary nature of the building trades structure – at the local and national levels – precluded the possibility of establishing and enforcing clear standards of accountability and discipline that multi-union organizing campaigns like BTOP require.

Would individual affiliates voluntarily divest some of their own power and invest it in a building trades formation that would then possess the legitimate authority to coordinate multi-union activity? Would affiliates be willing

to collectively determine a set of standards that each would adopt? Would they consider common standards requiring the commitment of sufficient resources and skilled staff to organize in their core jurisdiction? Would they allow a more powerful building trades council to hold each affiliate accountable to meet those agreed upon standards? Does the experience of coordinated bargaining, for Project Labor Agreements for example, provide a model that might be transferable to the challenge of coordinated organizing? These are questions worth exploring.

Some argue that this intrinsic weakness of building trades councils compounds the fourth structural problem: the mismatch between the craft based unionized sector and the actual organization of work in the dominant nonunion sector. Many building trades leaders admit – though rarely for public attribution – that there are simply too many affiliates in the unionized sector of the industry.

Historically, these affiliates grew out of well-defined crafts and have jealously protected their jurisdictions for over a hundred years. But this rigid craft orientation, and the fifteen affiliates it supports, poses a two-fold problem. First, work in the unionized sector of the industry has evolved in ways that sometimes blur these craft lines.



Without a strategy for union growth, the frequency and intensity of jurisdictional disputes within the unionized sector have increased. Unionized projects are sometimes delayed because individual affiliates fight over which trade will install a particular building component. As a consequence, the costs of union construction rise and the principle of cross-trade solidarity is threatened. Second, when building trades unions attempt to organize the nonunion market, they discover that their strict craft jurisdictions are neither reflected nor respected in the organization of open shop work. It is not as if specialty contractors employing individual crafts are not present in the nonunion sector of the industry. But there are not fifteen separate and distinct crafts. The structure of the building trades – with fifteen different affiliates – does not match the structure of the nonunion industry that must be organized.

Some building trades leaders are convinced that their own movement is at a crossroads.

How might they proceed? The Building and Construction Trades Department could establish a national “Futures Committee” to explore a broad range of strategic issues that are critical to the future of construction unionism. The committee could be comprised of leaders who believe dramatic change is needed and could be charged with making a set of recommendations after several months of deliberations. The committee’s work could be very inclusive: leaders and staff of national as well as local unions; state and local building and construction trades councils; and outside experts and allies.

A Futures Committee could help answer important questions:

- What innovative strategies are needed to organize the nonunion segments of the industry, including the vast residential market and the growing immigrant workforce?
- How can organizing activity be expanded and elevated to a pace and scale necessary to re-unionize the industry?
- What kinds of internal changes and capacity building are needed within individual affiliates?
- Should national building trades unions be restructured so they can more effectively organize regional, national, and even global contractors? If so, what structural changes make the most sense?
- To the extent that rebuilding union density in

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construction will require nationally coordinated, multi-union organizing campaigns, what is and ought to be the proper role of the Building and Construction Trades Department and its constituent councils?

- What, if any, standards – in terms of organizing resources, capacities and strategies – should national and local affiliates be required to meet in order to retain a jurisdictional claim to work now being done in the nonunion sector?
- If consolidating some of the fifteen building and construction trades unions into fewer affiliates would facilitate organizing nonunion construction, what would be the fairest way to effectuate strategic mergers?
 - What can building trades unions do differently to decisively reverse their declining power in the industry?

A Futures Committee that seriously grapples with these and other questions and recommends bold and thoughtful proposals could make a significant contribution to union renewal. Any course of action designed to re-establish the power and presence of unions in the construction industry will be fraught with risk. But the risk of inaction is far greater. Our nation’s construction workers – union and nonunion, alike – need and deserve a revitalized building trades union movement.

Editor’s note: An annotated version of this article is available at www.socialpolicy.org. A longer version of this article, co-authored with Mark Erlich, of New England Regional Council of Carpenters, will appear in *Labor History*.

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