

WHAT CAN UNIONS DO?
EXAMPLES FROM THE MASSACHUSETTS BUILDING TRADES

by

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SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE
DEGREE OF

MASTER IN CITY PLANNING

at the

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

June 1985

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BARBARA J. LIPSKI

Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies
and Planning on May 28, 1985 in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT

There are several recent examples from the Massachusetts building trades unions of successful tactics being implemented, or at least initiated, in order to regain the union's power to maintain high and stable wages and job security for their members.

In this paper I will describe some of these tactics, analyze their effectiveness, discuss why trades union leaders chose them, and speculate about how adaptable they may be for unions in other sectors. I propose that because workers in several of the new and growing sectors of the U.S. economy share many of the "craft" characteristics, of the building trades workers, a model of union structure can be developed to use as a guide for organizing new workers and for maintaining the strength of already organized "craft" sectors. Fundamental to this inquiry are the many interviews and conversations I have had with leaders and rank and file activists both in the trades and in other union sectors.

The characteristics of craft workers that allow successful union activity stem from the nature of the work itself, and require a complex mixture of flexibility and rigidity, of autonomy and cooperation, but most of all the ability to use the broad problem-solving skills inherent to the crafts.

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INTRODUCTION

As a member of the Boston Teachers Union, I was frustrated that we were not able to build enough strength to avoid the massive layoffs which devastated not only the thousand of us teachers who lost our jobs, but also the union itself. Many of us felt that the losses of 1981 and 1982 were attributable in part to our inability over the years to form alliances with parents and other community members, to broaden our issues to include more than traditional contract concerns, and to organize internally to create a culture of unionism rather than the atmosphere of racial division and individualism which weakened our union.

Much to my surprise, I discovered that local building trades were responding to similar threats to their job security and quality of their work lives with the creativity and breadth of vision that our union was not able to generate. Like many other progressive union activists, I had stereotyped the building trades as less than admirable. I dismissed construction workers and their unions as racist and politically reactionary, and felt that

other unionists therefore had little to learn from the activities of these craft workers. Yet over a period of several months, I noticed newspaper articles about construction workers volunteering their time and skills to rehabilitate housing for the homeless, investing their pension funds in order to create union jobs, and initiating talks with members of community groups about developing much needed moderate income housing in their neighborhoods.

In this paper I have attempted to examine some of these strategies, to describe the climate and institutional traditions that made these actions possible, and to speculate what might be generalized from the experiences and structure of the building trades unions to those in other sectors. Fundamental to this inquiry are the many interviews and conversations I have had with leaders and rank and file activists both in the trades and in other union sectors.

U.S. Unions Today

Indisputably, unions in the U.S. are in a state of crisis. Memberships have dropped and concessions have become commonplace; unions' political influence is minimal and there is a generally negative public image of what unions do.

There has been much analysis of why the unions are in such trouble. The northeastern manufacturing industries which have historically been strongly unionized have experienced a national disinvestment. The remaining industries tend to be concentrated in the less unionized service and "high tech" industries, and are often located in geographical areas likely to be non-union, such as the south. According to Henry Farber, however, these industrial, regional, occupational, and gender shifts in the composition of the labor force account for at most 40 percent of the decline in the extent of unionization over the past 25 years.¹ This analysis suggests that, it is within the power of the unions to act positively to revitalize the labor movement in traditional sectors--as well as to reach out to new and growing sectors of the work force.

Organized labor's inability to maintain wages, working conditions and job security for its members can be attributed to its failure to respond effectively to the changing face of American industrial organization on several levels. On the shop floor, workers are losing

1. Henry S. Farber, "The Extent of Unionization in the United States," in Challenges and Choices Facing American Labor, ed. Thomas J. Kochan (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), p. 38.

control over the organization of the work process and the social relationships which have, in many sectors, traditionally kept work from being too tedious or too alienating. At the level of collective bargaining, wages and benefits are being eroded. These losses can be attributed to labor's vulnerability to economic crisis and instability. Labor's inability to forcefully meet these challenges rests in part with its increasing political and cultural isolation and negative public image, which have hindered the mobilization of the necessary popular support to maintain its status as more than "another special interest group."

There are several recent examples from the Massachusetts building trades of successful tactics being implemented, or at least initiated, in order to regain union power. In this paper I will describe some of these tactics, analyze their effectiveness, discuss why trades union leaders chose them, and speculate about how adaptable they may be for unions in other sectors. I propose that, because workers in several of the new and growing sectors share many of the "craft" characteristics of the building trades workers, a model of union structure can be developed for organizing new workers and for maintaining the strength of already organized "craft" sectors.

2
THE BUILDING TRADES

History and Nature of the Building Trades

In order to understand the circumstances and motivations which led to the recent actions of the Massachusetts building trades we must first understand the unique nature of the work and the origins of the trades institutions. Construction workers are perhaps the archetypal craftsmen,³ and this fact affects every aspect of the building industry, its history and its unionization.

Craft Production

Craft production requires workers with a broad range

2. Though my anecdotal evidence is drawn from the Boston area building trades, I feel that the validity of the derived model is still relevant for sectors sharing similar characteristics in other geographic areas.

3. Although there are an increasing number of women involved in the trades, it is still true that the vast majority of construction workers are men. Men have dominated these trades, historically and currently, and to avoid fostering a misperception that women play a significant role in the industry, I will use the masculine pronoun when referring to construction workers.

of skills who can exercise control over their work and work environment. Rather than performing repetitive tasks, construction workers take much responsibility for their own work, making judgments about how, by whom, at what pace, and to what standards, work will be done.⁴ Furthermore, construction work is a sequential process, so that "failure to be ready with the right nail, board or screw puts everything on coffee-break hold."⁵ Thus it is necessary for every worker to have a full understanding of every aspect of the building process.

Building tradesmen must be able to organize and integrate a wide variety of materials, skills and workers over the period it takes to build a project--anywhere from a few weeks to several years. Though some of this planning is done by the contractors, many of these decisions are made by the workers themselves. Construction workers work in crews of around five, informally managed by one of the workers of that particular craft. The crew leaders meet periodically to coordinate work among the different

4. There is an increasing amount of industrialized construction now being done in factories, and though this sector is being organized to some extent by the trades unions, I see this as a separate sector, and will discuss this work later with respect to its influence on the traditional construction sector.

5. Bob Reckman, "Carpentry: The Craft and the Trade," in Case Studies on the Labor Process, ed. Andrew Zimbalist (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), p. 77.

crafts. Because each building is unique, and production is of limited duration, workers must think and act quickly and interact with workers from the other trades in order to decide how to organize the work: "Sure, I can move that window over--but I'll have to pull off the outside sheathing, reframe the wall, and move that electrical outlet. Plus, we'll probably have an additional sheet rock joint to tape and bed when we get to that."⁶ Decisions made at any point in the building process determine what will be possible later.

Sabel sees the essence of a craftsman as the ability to "[apply] his general knowledge in unforeseeable situations."⁷ This initiative and flexibility, characteristic of the building trades workers, is necessary in the creation of products which are themselves unique. Even the construction of apparently similar buildings varies due to geological or other site differences, new materials and technologies, weather conditions, and unexpected complications. That the work is often dangerous reinforces an acute awareness that the interdependence of their various skills ensures not only the quality and

6. Ibid.

7. Charles F. Sabel, Work and Politics: The Division of Labor in Industry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 23.

productivity of their work, but also their personal safety. This awareness, along with pride in their respective crafts, has led to solidarity among building trades workers. Before sympathy strikes were ruled illegal, all workers on a specific project were likely to join a strike initiated by one craft local. For example, if the iron-workers felt that not enough skilled workers were hired, and that their safety was endangered because the contractor refused to remedy the situation, not only would the iron-workers walk off the job, but so would the workers from the other trades. This support had more to do with a sense of brotherhood than with generating the power to shut down a job: due to the cooperative and sequential nature of the building process, a strike by any one craft can stop work on an entire project.

Craft Jurisdiction

The interrelatedness of the building crafts has created not only solidarity, but territoriality: each craft has strict jurisdictional control over the right to perform a specific set of tasks. A carpenter, for instance, is not supposed to put in an electrical outlet. Even though many carpenters do in fact have the skills to do this work, an electrician who is paid a higher wage because of his knowledge of this special procedure has jurisdiction over

this job. Despite the fact that workers from different trades share a work site, skill levels and a similar culture, they do not share wage rates and jurisdictional control. (The impact of jurisdictional disputes is discussed later in this chapter.)

Historically, the tasks of designing, engineering, planning, coordinating, and even financing a building project were executed by one person--the builder. According to John Joyce, a bricklayer, all functions of the building process were combined in the job of master mason⁸ in the sixteenth century. Bob Reckman, a carpenter, documents the master carpenter's responsibility for the entire design and construction of buildings two centuries⁹ later.

In the first half of the nineteenth century the role of the craftsmen began to change. Large projects such as bridges, warehouses, railroad stations and commercial buildings were built to meet the needs of a changing economy. At this time craftsmen began to lose their responsibilities as planners, organizers and designers

8. John T. Joyce (President, International Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen--representing the AFL-CIO), paper presented to the International Labor Organization Symposium on Workers' Participation (The Hague: May 5-8, 1980), p. 9.

9. Reckman, p. 78.

because these new complicated projects needed the expertise of specialist engineers. Also at this time the smaller master carpenters, who had traditionally financed the cost of a building, no longer had access to sufficient capital for projects of this size. Therefore a class of "speculators,"¹⁰ many without previous connections to the building trades, began to usurp the financing function, and former journeymen who had risen to become masters began to assume a new role as labor contractors. Thus the small master carpenter, no longer an independent merchant producer, assumed job functions that often came into conflict with those of the journeymen: The masters had to keep costs competitive by cutting wages and increasing the hours worked per day; the journeymen, on the other hand, had to protect their traditional status and prerogatives.¹¹

The craftsmen were cognizant of the contradictory position of their masters.

We would not be too severe on our employers . . . they are slaves to the capitalists as we are to them. . . . [B]ut we cannot bear to be servants of servants and slaves to oppression, let the source be where it may."¹²

10. Reckman, p. 84.

11. Ibid.

12. John R. Commons, et al., A Documentary History of American History (Cleveland, OH: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1910), p. 388; in Reckman, p. 85.

This history helps to explain the apparently contradictory relationship between building tradesmen and their employers. Though on the job there is mutual respect and labor-management roles are sometimes blurred (it is common, in fact, for a worker to be self-employed, even to hire his own crew, during periods when well-paying work on large construction jobs is scarce), there is also a clear awareness of workers' need to protect their rights with formal mechanisms.

Unionization of the Building Trades

History

Organization of craft workers has a long history. As early as 1790, before the first recorded instance of collective bargaining in this country, master carpenters in Boston had formed a local association to regulate wage rates, working conditions and apprenticeship training. By the 1820's journeymen's unions, acting on a growing awareness of the split from the masters, began organizing in order to preserve their traditional regulation of the trades. For example, in 1825 Boston journeymen carpenters struck for a ten-hour workday. Early organizing efforts

reflected craftsmen's characteristic values; as E. P. Thompson explains,

Customary traditions of craftsmanship normally went together with vestigial notions of a 'fair' price and a 'just' wage. Social and moral criteria--subsistence, self-respect, pride in certain standards of workmanship, customary rewards for different grades of skill--these are as prominent in early trade union disputes as strictly 'economic' arguments. ¹³

Employers were willing to accept the conditions imposed by tradesmen because, in contrast to the manufacturing industries, the trades unions were the only source of adequately trained labor. Thus construction workers have had the ability to demand, rather than negotiate with employers, the terms of their wage rates, hours and working conditions. Since the lines between employer and employee were not yet sharply delineated, these demands were not seen as radical. In New York in 1850, for example, the Bricklayers and Plasterers Protective Association gave notice to employers that "Commencing on the first day of March up to the thirteenth day of November inclusive, wages will be \$2.00 per day."¹⁴ Similarly, in 1833 the bricklayers of Baltimore collectively proclaimed a

13. E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), p. 236.

14. Joyce, pp. 8-9.

ten-hour-maximum work day. Though tradesmen have lost the power to set their own terms by direct action, the tradition of worker pride and control has survived. This tradition may be the single most crucial source of resistance to current threats to the building trades unions.

Structure and Organization of the Building Trades Unions

At present there are eighteen crafts affiliated with the Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO. Due to changing production methods and materials some specific crafts have merged with others and some have been added to the list, but each craft maintains autonomous control over its jurisdiction. Currently the crafts can be grouped into three categories: basic trades (bricklayers, carpenters, operating engineers, laborers, iron-workers, etc.), mechanical trades (electricians, plumbers and pipefitters, sheetmetal workers, etc.), and specialty trades (asbestos workers, lathers, painters, etc.).

In 1982 78 percent of all construction in the U.S. was private. Of this, 41 percent was residential and 34 percent non-residential, or commercial. The bulk of the remainder of the privately build construction was in public utilities. Most of the publicly built projects, 20 percent of which were federally financed, were schools, highways

and other institutional structures. ¹⁵ In 1972 there were
over 920,000 construction companies, ¹⁶ most of them quite
small. The small companies generally do residential and
subcontracting work, while the large firms dominate the
large-scale building contracts.

Since World War II, the building trades have
accounted for approximately 11 percent of the GNP, and have
employed approximately one of every twenty workers in the
country. ¹⁷ The construction trades have a higher
proportion of skilled workers than any other industry.
Almost half are "craftsmen, foremen, and kindred workers,"
in comparison to only 20 percent in the manufacturing
sector. Thirty percent of all "craftsmen and kindred
workers" are employed in construction. ¹⁸ Although there is
a general decline in the number of blue collar workers, it
is notable that construction is the only goods-producing
industry whose share of total employment has not

15. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Construction Reports, series
C30, 1982.

16. Reckman, p. 75.

17. Julian Lange and Daniel Quinn Mills, The Construction
Industry (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1979),
p.1.

18. Reckman, p. 75.

19. Reckman, p. 74.

significantly dropped since the mid-1950's. These workers are not striving for upward mobility, but for the preservation of the craft tradition and their pride in their status and skill; a tradesman's greatest hope is that his son will follow him into his craft and that his daughter will marry a member of the trades. The relative strength of the building trades unions are largely a function of the craft nature of construction work. The jurisdictional control also inherent in this tradition, however, has been a mixed blessing for the trades unions.

Piore and Sabel explain that until World War II, when new materials and processes came into widespread use, a new craft jurisdiction would be created. For example, when hoisting or operating machines used to dig foundations became commonly used, a new jurisdictional category was created, because the skills of this craft were different from the skills of the existing jurisdictions. After the war, however, the unions, contrary to craft logic, apportioned the new work forms on a case-by-case basis, equally among the existing crafts:

For example, rather than creating a new union of plastic workers, or expanding the jurisdiction of carpenters to include plastics, each new plastic material was assigned by rota to a given union--some to carpenters, some to masons, some to iron-workers...[the] goal was to

avoid the wildcat strikes over jurisdictional disputes that plagued the construction industry. 20

The consequent squabbling over which trade has the "right" to control the work of the emerging crafts has often divided the trades in a way that undermines the traditional respect between members of the various autonomous trades. Jurisdictional disputes are sometimes of such "unbelievable intensity"²¹ that at times they can take up the entire business of a union meeting, directing time and energy away from organizing efforts.

Work Rules

In spite of the interjurisdictional problems, each trade has maintained authority over how work within its jurisdiction is to be performed. This control has led to a set of work rules which are incorporated into contracts. Generally these rules put restrictions on output levels, piecework, subcontracting, overtime, the hiring and firing of workers, and an employer's right to work with the tools of the trades; they also require the employment of

20. Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel, The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), p. 123.

21. Interview with Mark Erlich, United Brotherhood of Carpenters Local 40-Boston.

22. William Haber and Harold M. Levinson, Labor Relations

"unnecessary" men. Non-union contractors give the rules as an example of union inefficiency, but studies do not support their claim that productivity is lower on union jobs than on the non-union jobs not governed by work rules.
23

Although there are instances of absurd regulations, such as a St. Louis painters' local requirement that three men must be hired for the first paint spray gun and two more men for each additional gun,²⁴ most of the rules do protect the fundamental economic character and social customs of the industry, and thus provide workers contractually with a greater amount of job security and satisfaction. An example of a rule more characteristic of the trade is the requirement that the maximum width of a brush used to apply oil paint be four-and-one-half inches. Though at first it may appear as if this merely limits productivity, in fact the rule assures a quality job and also the welfare of the painter. Because the paint is relatively heavy, a larger brush would fatigue the painter's arm and wrist. Also, in order to have a smoothly

and Productivity in the Building Trades (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1956), p. 157.

23. Clinton Bourdon and Raymond E. Leavitt, Union and Open-Shop Construction (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1980), p. 82.

24. Haber and Levinson, p. 178.

painted surface, the painter must apply the paint continuously so that the edge of the paint doesn't dry out before the next stroke is applied. Experienced painters know that this size brush will facilitate the necessary continuity.
25

It's important to distinguish these work rules from the detailed and rigid job descriptions typically found in industrial union contracts. The craft rules are the product of experience. They are derived from the traditional ways of doing the work and often provide an historic cataloguing of rule-of-thumb traditions. Also, the work rules serve to maintain the autonomy and on-the-job independence of the construction worker. Rather than dividing the work into discrete tasks, these rules serve to preserve jurisdiction over a broad range of skills and to keep task distribution within the control of the workers rather than the employers. Thus they help to ensure the flexibility construction workers need, to adapt, for example, to a technological innovation. This flexibility even enables workers to change inappropriate rules: Workers or their union representatives commonly suspend rules in order to facilitate production--as long as work safety and formal control over the building processes

25. Ibid., p. 164.

continue to be protected. These concessions are made on a case-by-case basis and do not affect the status of any negotiated agreement.

For example, Walter Ryan, the business manager of the Operating Engineers, Local 4, was called by a contractor who asked him if a contract requiring a certain number of men on a machine could be modified to require fewer men. After carefully questioning the contractor about the effects the relaxation of the rule would have on the safety of the workers, Ryan agreed. This type of cooperation, Ryan feels, can make union contractors more competitive in bidding for jobs; he'd rather see six men working at full wages than eight jobs lost. In this way the unions, flexible in selected circumstances, can still maintain formal control of the manning requirement.

The Union Business Agent

To reiterate, job control is one source of the historical strength of building trades unions. Another is the broad craft knowledge and initiative of the tradesmen, who are not cowed by their class relationship to their employers. Because the lines between the roles of workers and managers are blurred, union members often perform functions which are in other sectors reserved for management. Since foremen belong to the same unions as the

men they supervise, they are apt to consider the union business agent, rather than the contractor, to be their de facto employer, going to him for instructions or support.

While the other elected officers, the president and vice-president, are responsible for internal union matters, it is the business agent who plays the critical role in members' daily lives. He is responsible for negotiating and enforcing contracts, calling or not calling strikes, handling on-site grievances and jurisdictional disputes informally (and when necessary, formally), deciding when to modify work rules on specific projects, collecting union dues, and controlling the union hiring halls. The incredible power of the union business agent, when abused, has been the basis of notorious cases of union corruption--though the fact that the business agent is an elected union official can help to check such abuses as collecting "strike insurance" from contractors or going overboard in helping friends to find work. When used judiciously, however, the business agent's power can hold unions together. The business agents' day-to-day contact with members is one of the reasons workers are not alienated from their unions. The intimate work relationships characteristic of the crafts are thus paralleled in the trades unions. Building tradesmen may be solidly behind union leadership, or vehemently opposed to

it, but they are never unaware of their union status!

Collective Bargaining-Wages, Hiring, Job-Training

The stability of large mass-production plants allows industrial unions to organize union elections for entire companies and industries. This cannot be done in craft unions. In 1948 the National Labor Relations Board held its first union election in the construction trades, as stipulated by the Taft-Hartley Act. Preparations for the election of union representation for western Pennsylvania road construction workers required three months of staff work and twenty-five mobile crews of NLRB representatives to supervise the voting. Despite this enormous effort and expense only 2709 workers out of an eligible 18,000 were on the job that day, and they voted ten to one for the union. This case involving "only" one hundred contractors and five unions was a relatively simple one for the industry. Obviously, the unique characteristics of the employer-employee relationship in the construction industry

26. Haber and Levinson, p. 67.

require a form of union recognition that is different from the form appropriate for a large industrial firm.

Construction workers work at a large number of small, scattered sites, and do not work at any one job for very long. By the time an election is organized, the workers have likely moved to new jobs at new construction sites. Therefore, the construction trades, like other multi-employer sectors like garment workers, have different procedures for unionizing. Instead of holding elections for workers, the unions and a group of employers negotiate a contract. The collective bargaining usually consists of all workers of a specific craft in a particular city or region. Though there are some state and even national contracts, given the previously discussed craft autonomy, it's unlikely that local unions will be willing to give up their negotiating power to a national union.

As with all facets of the construction sector the specifics of contracts vary widely from craft to craft and from region to region. Once a contract is signed, all union work done in that trade and area is bound by the contract. It's not unusual, however, for a contractor to request a modification of the contract, often with respect to work rules, on a specific project. This is a matter between the contractor and the business agent, not the members.

Wages

Since the days when unilateral declarations were all that building trades workers needed to set the conditions of their work, and collective bargaining became the norm, direct worker control of the labor supply and the production process have been the bases of union strength. Building trade workers have been able to increase their wage rates, especially in times of economic expansion. Since 1965 their wage increases have exceeded even those won by other skilled workers. By 1970 the average hourly earnings in contract construction exceeded those in all manufacturing industries by 55 percent, the greatest differential since 1947.²⁷

One reason for the gains made by workers in the construction is the structure of collective bargaining. Because each craft bargains separately, wage rates for craft and area "leapfrog," thereby creating an upward pressure on wage levels.²⁸ The competition between the trades contributes to this wage spiral. Within the established hierarchical craft structure, each craft tries

27. Daniel Quinn Mills, Industrial Relations and Manpower in Construction (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972), p. 60.

28. Ibid., p. 61.

to win a larger wage increase than the others. Although there is wage competition between crafts, within each craft there is wage equality: apprentice sheetmetal workers earn the same hourly wage, journeymen plumbers earn the same hourly wage, etc. The effectiveness of this bargaining mechanism is enhanced by the traditional militance of construction workers, who have often rejected proposed settlements even when they are comparable to other settlements in the region. Tom Evers, President of the Massachusetts Building Trades, says that most construction workers see wage concessions as an admission of weakness. Though they may concede work rules at times, it is against the "manly" traditions of the crafts to concede wages.

Another way that construction workers have managed to keep wages high and out of competition with the large number of non-union workers is through legislation. Bills such as the Davis-Bacon Act require that contractors on

29. Ibid.

30. David Montgomery gives many examples of the craftsman's ethical code requiring "a 'manly' bearing toward the boss." During the nineteenth century, "few words enjoyed more popularity . . . than this honorific, with all its connotations of dignity, respectability, defiant egalitarianism, and patriarchal male supremacy." This characterization is no less apt for construction workers today. David Montgomery, Worker's Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 13.

federal projects pay workers in each craft no less than the prevailing wage rate for work in the local area. This means that during periods of recession, costs cannot be cut by hiring non-union workers at low wages. This bill, strongly opposed by non-union contractors, benefits union firms as well as union members. Tommy McIntyre of the Bricklayers, calls Davis-Bacon a "creature of the employers," because it makes it impossible for non-union contractors to outbid union contractors by hiring workers for less than union scale. McIntyre is well aware of the importance of this bill in maintaining wages and jobs for union members, yet he is also expressing a traditional ambivalence toward relying on legal mechanisms rather than direct worker action to maintain union strength. The trade unions' militant self reliance, however, does not promote the broad political base of support that will allow the trades to hold on to legal mechanisms, which reinforce union strength even though they are not fundamental to it.

Hiring

The ability of the building trades unions to keep

31. Mills cites BLS statistics to point out that "rarely is there a year when the proportion of estimated working time lost due to [work] stoppages in construction fails to exceed the national all-industry average, and it usually doubles or triples it." Mills, p. 48.

wages high can be attributed to their control over the supply of skilled labor. Another critical function that building trades unions have historically controlled is that of linking workers with jobs. When there is a building boom, employers need a ready supply of skilled labor. Given the fluctuation of the demand for building construction, employers do not want to carry the burden of hiring permanent employees whom they would have to either pay or lay off during slack times. The employers are therefore willing to concede their right to hire to the unions. A worker is bound not to one particular employer, but to the union hiring hall through which he will be placed in a job. Thus workers develop an allegiance to the union rather than to any one employer. Furthermore, until recently workers spent many hours socializing at the union hall while waiting for job assignments. A construction worker's entire social life often revolved around his union. As Mark Erlich explains, "It's their family network, their community, a twenty-four-hour-a-day relationship."

32

No doubt this personal contact promoted an atmosphere of camaraderie, especially in times when jobs were few and far between. "Once you're in, you're in. You take care of

32. Interview with Mark Erlich

each other." Erlich explained that this brotherhood extends even across geographical jurisdictional boundaries. He told a story about a carpenter who had to move to a new state because his daughter needed an operation. The union not only accepted him, but covered for him when he was absent from work because he was at the hospital. When Erlich was out of work, he was sent by the director of apprentices to a non-union job, violating what is an even more sacrosanct regulation than jurisdiction. The spirit of brotherhood has even become codified as part of the constitution of several locals. The Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 12 in Boston, for example, includes in their constitution a section about the responsibility of members to provide "warm friendship" and assistance in finding work for unemployed brothers. Yet it is the relationships, not the rules, which are most valued by the construction trades unions. This flexibility and power to serve the needs of members is not always possible in other unions, even when the friendship exists.

Because unions control hiring, they also directly control the supply of labor to contractors, and therefore resemble a closed shop. Though by law they must not discriminate against non-union workers, in reality few non-union workers will be sent to jobs through a union hall. The Taft-Hartley Law in 1947 outlawed closed shops.

33. ibid.

Yet it wasn't until ten years later that the Supreme Court ruled that hiring halls couldn't use union membership as a hiring standard. Especially because there are few complaints from contractors, who are free to hire non-union workers at times when the unions cannot supply enough workers, unions still consider union membership a prerequisite for employment in a union shop.

Building trades unions practice a unique method of job allocation. While industrial unions follow seniority rules in determining who gets or keeps a job, most building trades rotate work among members. The business agent keeps a list of people looking for work, ranked by how much time has elapsed since a worker's last job. Some trade unions simply assign jobs by matching skills. Because jobs are of short duration, job-sharing is necessary to ensure that young and old workers alike share whatever work is available. This job rationing, like other elements of craft unionism, promotes union cohesion by treating all workers equally. Yet even this system is flexible and can be modified, but "only by communally sanctioned judgments of equity: in periods of adversity, workers with large families, extraordinary medical expenses, or other exceptional needs may be given priority in job

34. Piore and Sabel, p. 116.

34
assignments."

Training Programs

Building trades unions control not only the distribution, but also the supply of labor. Because the nature of craft production necessitates a labor force proficient in a variety of skills, and able to plan, execute and supervise its own work, training programs are another important institutional structure. Historically, apprenticed workers were trained by master craftsmen in a specific trade. This practice, not much changed over the years, has been institutionalized into formal, state-certified programs, which are jointly administered by the unions and employers groups. Sabel describes not only the functions of the apprenticeship training, but also the root of the craft culture:

[The apprenticeship experience teaches] two related lessons. The first concerns objects and techniques, the second the social preconditions and implications of the craft's knowledge...The craftsman must be able not only to make things, but to make them as quickly as possible with the available materials and tools and minimum waste. This he can learn only on the job. And as he gains practical experience on the job, he learns a second lesson about learning itself--that he will never know all there is to know about the materials and techniques of his work, and that what he does know can be learned only in collaboration with other craftsmen...[they] have the capacity to teach diligence, attention to detail and the peculiar mixture of reverence for tradition in the large and the capacity to disregard it in the small that is characteristic of anyone who is successful doing things the old

way. Apprenticeship encourages these traits, giving them at the same time a concrete form that often separates the young worker from the culture of his family and united him all the more securely with his mates. The French say, 'Le métier fait l'homme,' the craft makes the man.³⁵

Though the exact terms of the finance and organization of apprenticeship programs vary by trade, employers typically contribute a certain amount of cents-per-hour to training programs for each hour their employees work in a trade. Apprentices receive three or four years of off-site classroom instruction and more traditional on-the-job training. The number of apprenticeships is limited by the unions through contractual restrictions on the ratios of apprentices to journeymen, and competition for entry into these programs is fierce. Slots are often awarded to the sons and grandsons of union members. Although this practice helps to build a membership which shares social values, including strong union affiliation, it excludes workers who do not belong to the predominant ethnic culture of the trade.

Most entrance into trade unions is through the apprenticeship programs, but there is a small proportion of construction workers who enter by other means. Certain trades, carpenters for instance, will allow a contractor to

35. Sabel, pp. 83-84.

hire a non-union worker if the worker joins the union within a week after hiring. The number of tradesmen entering unions through the "back door" is not large enough to alter the fact that the perpetuation of the craft tradition through one of its fundamental mechanisms, apprenticeship, leaves the building trades unions open to criticism for their exclusionary practices.

Relations with Minority Groups

"The building trades don't discriminate against anybody, they discriminate against EVERYBODY!" is the way one union leader dismissed accusations of racism in the trades. There are in fact historic and structural reasons other than racism for the exclusion of recent immigrants and blacks. The building trades unions, among the earliest unions formed in this country, were organized at a time when there were few black craftsmen in the North, and because membership was reserved for family and friends of union members, there was not a way for newcomers to break into the trades. In the South, on the other hand, the trowel trades (bricklayers, plasterers, cement finishers) accepted black members because there was a sufficient

number of black workers with skills in these trades. Since craft unions in this country were organized shortly after the Civil War, however, when whites considered it "improper" to have social relations with blacks,³⁷ the southern unions that did admit blacks set up parallel local unions rather than including black members in white "brotherhoods."

Blacks were not the only group excluded from union participation. A significant change in production technology at this time enabled the contractors to hire "greenhands," women, children and immigrants "who displaced a score of carpenters at half the wages of one . . . hundreds of thousands [of carpenters were] thrown in idleness on the pavement."³⁸

Although there had been prior technological changes, the nature of the tradesman's work hadn't changed much before 1872. After this point,

 36. F. Ray Marshall, Allan M. Cartter, and Allan G. King, Labor Economics: Wages, Employment, and Trade Unionism (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin Inc., 1976), p.530.

 37. Ibid.

38. Robert Christie, Empire in Wood: A History of the Carpenters Union (Ithaca, NY: The New York State School of Industrial Relations, 1956), p. 25; cited in Reckman, p. 87.

a host of woodworking machine inventions rained down upon the unprotected craft. A sander which smoothed wood as fast as a dozen carpenters and a compound carver which turned out six wood duplicates and replaced three-score carpenters were but two of a series of such inventions which lured handicraft work into the factory . . . 39

With the centralization of production of windows, doors, simple moldings and the like in factories where specialized labor was used, carpenters were deprived of the occasion to use their skills, and thus of their jobs. Though it may today seem that the new workers should have been unionized and thus controlled at the time, the "greenhands" were excluded because they were not seen as craftsmen. They were perceived as a threat to the unions' ability to protect their members from competition with workers "willing" to work for lower wages. Direct and overt racism and ethnic chauvinism, of course, also played their role in excluding blacks and immigrants.

Union-Minority Antagonism in Boston

The antagonism between the building trades unions and the minority communities in Boston came to a head in 1967, when federal funds were pouring into Boston. At the time Model Cities was designing its building program, there was federal support for the construction and rehabilitation of

39. Ibid.

public facilities, homes, highway construction and the expansion of Logan Airport. HEW contributed funds for construction on university campuses. But black construction workers were being excluded from this work by unions and union contractors. In 1968 only two percent of all union apprentices, and even fewer journeymen, were black. Racial tensions were heightened by the overt insensitivity of many white unionists, typified by the statement of the Plumbers Union president who, at a meeting of the union-controlled advisory committee to the Bureau of Apprenticeship, on the day after Martin Luther King was assassinated, said that his union didn't have to do any more because "we let one in last year."⁴⁰

In response to the entire situation, the United Community Construction Workers (UCCW), the first black union since Reconstruction, was started to get a fair share⁴¹ of the federal "plunder" for the community. A decade later, the unions were still managing to exclude new workers, in spite of several initiatives by minority community groups, such as the Third World Jobs Clearing House, which provided training and job placement for minorities and women. The minority construction workers in

40. Mel King, Chain of Change (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981), p. 170.

41. Ibid. pp. 97-100.

1977 formed a coalition with white residents of the city who were also excluded and formed the Boston Jobs Coalition, organized under the slogan, "Boston Jobs for Boston People." Because of the increasingly suburban character of the construction work, the demand for jobs for Boston residents was not just a minority demand. In 1979 the Boston Jobs Coalition was finally successful in getting Mayor White to sign an Executive Order, agreeing to the principles of hiring a minimum of 50 percent Boston residents, 25 percent minorities and 10 percent women to work on any publicly funded or subsidized developments.⁴² In 1983 the Boston Jobs Residency Ordinance was finally signed into law. In 1984 the unions and union contractors renewed a lawsuit against the Boston Jobs Ordinance.⁴³

Today, unions are admitting a growing number of women, as well as blacks and Hispanics. Minorities make up over 14 percent of the apprenticeships (9.1% black, 3.6% Hispanic). The training programs include over six percent women.⁴⁴ No doubt this is attributable in large part to national civil rights legislation, as well as local efforts

42. Ibid., p. 192.

43. The Labor Page, March/April 1985, p.5.

44. Barbara Lipski, "Minority Participation in the Building Trades," unpublished paper, JFK School of Government, Fall, 1984.

of minority groups which resulted in regulations like the Boston Jobs Ordinance. There are \$500 million in wages at stake generated by current city-funded and city-administered projects.⁴⁵ Yet white union leaders and rank and file members are increasingly aware of the fact that there are other practical reasons for organizing new workers. Given the rising power of the non-union contractors, unions need to accept the fact that they can no longer control the labor supply or exclude people from the work: the new workers should be organized into the unions, for if new workers are not included, they could become competitors for the jobs currently held by union members.

The building trades have recently made an agreement with the Boston public schools to recruit graduates for apprenticeship programs. Each union has agreed that in three years 15 percent of their apprentices will be Boston public school graduates.⁴⁶ This is important for the minority communities because the schools are about 50 percent black and 20 percent Hispanic, Asian, and other minorities. One recent illustration of a new spirit of cooperation with community groups is that Tom Evers,

45. The Labor Page, p. 1.

46. Boston Globe, November 22, 1984.

President of the Massachusetts Building Trades Council, spoke at a large and militant May Day rally in support of black South African workers and against apartheid. Evers spoke about educating his constituency so that they will become more actively involved in fighting for such issues of social justice for all workers. These initiatives are important in beginning to address the problems the unions have, now that many members have moved out of Boston. Alienated from the growing minority communities, they need to reach out in order to establish ties with the residents of communities where they want to work. I will discuss more substantive efforts to build these ties in the next chapter of the paper.

Massachusetts Building Trade Unions: The Erosion of Strength

The building trades, like other sectors, are suffering the effects of a changing economy and an aggressive anti-union environment. The Business Roundtable reports that by some estimates, the percent of construction done in the country by union firms decreased from 70 to 40 percent between 1973 and 1980, and that during those years, "the number of

craftsmen identifying themselves as union members declined by 125,000, to only 1.6 million, while those identifying themselves as non-union workers had risen by 400,000, to nearly 3 million." ⁴⁷ These figures parallel the increasing proportion of large non-union firms. Data from the Congressional Budget Office show that in 1969 only four percent of the 400 largest construction firms (by sales volume) were non-union. This percentage had increased to ⁴⁸ 13 percent by 1979, and to 24 percent by 1982. In 1969, for the first time, the largest contractor in the industry ⁴⁹ by sales volume was non-union.

Construction workers, like workers in other unions, have been pressured into concession bargaining. Plumbers in Portland, Oregon took an hourly wage cut for residential and repair work from \$23.74 to \$14.79. Operating Engineers in Northern California took a 15 percent cut in wages and benefits, as well as a reduction in the number of work classifications from 260 to 6. Carpenters in Baltimore agreed to accept a new worker classification, which allows employers to hire unskilled workers at a

47. The Business Roundtable, p. 13.

48. Congressional Budget Office, Modifying the Davis-Bacon Act: Implications for the Labor Market and Federal Budget (January 1983), p. 12.

49. Mills, p. 57.

'pre-apprenticeship' rate of only \$5 an hour. Unions in other cities have given up similar concessions, which have proven all but useless in protecting workers' jobs. According to the BLS, average construction wage increases have dropped from 13.5 percent in 1981 to 6.5 percent in 1982, and -.2 percent in the first quarter of 1983.

In Massachusetts, where nearly 3.5 percent of the workforce is engaged in construction, non-union shops are "creeping west to east." The success of the non-union sector in Boston is vividly described by Bruce Mohl in a Boston Globe article on work-preservation clauses in recent contracts. These clauses prohibit contractors from operating both union and non-union construction companies in the same area.

The first line was drawn somewhere around I-495. Then the construction unions closed ranks behind Route 128. Now they are circling the wagons around Boston, relying on tough contract language to protect their last remaining stronghold in Massachusetts from further inroads

50. Jane Slaughter, Concessions and How to Beat Them (Detroit, MI: Labor Education and Research Project, 1983), pp. 16-19.

51. Ibid., p. 27.

52. US Census-Detailed Population Characteristics-1980.

53. Bruce A. Mohl, "Drawing the Line: Unions Win Work Preservation Clause," Boston Globe, October 23, 1984, p. 51.

by non-union contractors.

Though melodramatic, this image does dramatize the struggle between the unions and the non-union sector, and the importance to the unions of maintaining their strength in the city of Boston.

In Boston the unions control virtually all large non-residential projects as well as many city-sponsored housing projects. There are several reasons for this concentrated strength. First, the city is experiencing a building boom. Several new hotels and retail and office complexes have recently been completed, and several more major projects are under way. Second, Boston is an old city whose working-class citizens are largely from union families. Though many tradesmen have moved to areas like Quincy, they still return to Boston neighborhoods, gathering at institutions such as Amrheins, a bar and restaurant in South Boston where they can be assured of meeting up with old friends. The city's administration reflects its citizenry's pro-labor orientation. Third, and not unrelated, is the tradition of worker militance in Boston, so well-known that Herbert Northrup, of the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania, comments that "no open shop would build in Boston downtown, 54. Ibid."

55. Ibid.

they couldn't get enough police protection!"

At one time the unions controlled most of the residential work in the Boston area. Even most of the individually built triple-deckers were union-built. But from the post-World War II construction boom until the 1972 recession, there was so much work that unionists were able to choose the jobs they wanted, and they chose the large commercial jobs which paid well, leaving the smaller and lower paying residential jobs for non-union, less skilled workers. Now the unions control only five to ten percent of the residential work in the area.⁵⁶ They continue to dominate the medium- to large-scale developments built for commercial use, but this too may change.

Technological Changes

There has been a continuing progression of technology over the decades which had enabled choices about how to organize the construction process. The development of the balloon-frame house or hand-held power tools did not significantly change the trades. In fact, learning how to adapt to a new method or use a new tool is a source of pride for the craftsman.

56. Interview with Erlich.

What did change the very nature of construction work was the introduction of mass-production technologies, and increasing reliance on factory production--first, standardized doors and windows in mills, and more recently, the rise of pre-fabricated and manufactured housing as well as mobile homes. These new production methods further divide the skilled labor of the craftsman into separate tasks. Not only is the factory work itself an industrial job, rather than a craft job, but construction workers who assemble the factory built-homes on site are deprived of the use of their broad skills as well. Tom Evers describes the new work as a "division of labor into small pieces each done by a specialist, so a foreman's main function is 57 changing to personnel management, not decision-making."

In 1970 the mobile home industry produced almost half of the single-family homes in California and 40 percent in 58 the U.S. Now it is possible to factory-produce an entire home in another state, transport it by truck to Massachusetts, and use very few men to assemble it. The major characteristic of the construction industry, its site-specificity, is now being changed. Large contractors,

57. Interview with Tom Evers, President of the Massachusetts Building Trades Council.

58. Clyde Johnson, Organize or Die (Berkeley, CA: Clyde Johnson, Publisher, 1970), p. 27.

like auto manufacturers, can now move production out to non-union areas of the country. In Massachusetts, the Executive Office of Communities and Development is currently researching ways to facilitate the manufacture and sales of mobile homes by changing zoning regulations and possibly arranging subsidized financing for owners.⁵⁹

Union workers are concerned with the loss of control over their jobs, but even more immediately with the loss of their jobs. The City of Boston's Neighborhood Development and Employment Agency is involved in promoting New Hampshire-manufactured housing as a solution to the city's housing problem. I'll discuss union reaction to this in the next section, but here want to emphasize the potential for this technology to severely diminish the construction unions' power. (The building trades unions are beginning to organize these factories, but not very successfully as yet; perhaps this is where they may learn something from the industrial unions.)

Growth of the Non-Union Sector

Union influence is also declining because of the easy entry of new non-union firms (which are often short-lived) into the industry and the rapid expansion of construction

59. Mobile Homes: Housing for Massachusetts (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, March 1977).

in the suburbs and sunbelt, where unions are traditionally less influential. Not only are unions outside the immediate Boston area beginning to lose more of the residential work, but non-union firms are beginning to expand their influence to the larger commercial projects as well. In the past, non-union contractors have been poorly organized, but groups like the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC), the largest and fastest growing non-union association in the industry, have been increasing their membership and influence.

Stephen P. Tocco, executive director of the Massachusetts ABC, holds the general non-union position that unions, which represent roughly 40 percent of the construction workers in the state, may once have had a place in construction but are no longer necessary to protect the rights of workers. ⁶⁰ When interviewed on The David Finnegan Show last fall, Tocco mentioned several times that open-shop contractors show concern for their employees by giving them turkeys at holiday times.

It seems unlikely that this display of generosity will be able to offer construction workers the financial security, personal safety and human dignity for which unions have been struggling for over a century. The

60. Boston Globe, November 14, 1984.

building trades unions actively address the serious problems that their members face. Construction workers have a higher accidental death rate than do workers in any other industry except mining and agriculture. They have the highest injury rates, the highest unemployment and underemployment rates and the "most wildly erratic wage patterns" of any workers. Hourly construction wages are high, but the average worker is employed for only 30 to 35⁶¹ forty-hour weeks in a "good" year. Though Tocco's talk of turkeys may seem laughable, the ABC presents a real threat to the unions. ABC has grown from an organization with about 500 member contractors in the mid-1950's to a large and sophisticated force with over 12,000 members by the late 1970's. The Massachusetts division counted almost 500 members in 1984.

The aggression of non-union groups specifically threatens the craft tradition that has been the source of the building trades unions' strength. A major priority for ABC, for example, is to break the unions' hold on training so that unions no longer have a monopoly over the skilled labor force. The primary characteristic of the non-union training is the "task-oriented" approach, which many union workers believe is incompatible with craft production. The

61. Joyce, p. 13.

non-union apprenticeship programs are requesting permission from the state apprenticeship board to graduate workers after they pass an objective test, forgoing the years of interactive learning and skill-building required in the union programs.

Charles Yelin, a public relations specialist for ABC, says that there is "a horrifying shortage of entry-level workers." Stage one of ABC's training plan is the Merit Shop Institute, which had 500 Massachusetts workers enrolled in 1982. As the title of the program indicates, its workers will be rewarded for "merit," again an idea against the traditions of the trades, where salaries and benefits of all members of a craft are paid equally. One union activist said that one of the most important things the trades unions have been able to accomplish is the maintenance of a standard wage (all journeymen in a craft make the same hourly wage). He says that "merit" pay will lead to the division of labor into more pay categories; at the heart of the open-shop philosophy is a system that will enable contractors to pay their workers less than if standard wages applied to all workers. Whereas in a union shop a leadman is informally in charge of a crew of three

62. Lynda Gorov, "Nonunion Contractors Cry Foul on Apprenticeship Issue," Boston Globe, April 2, 1985, p. 39.

63. Interview with Charles Yelin, ABC.

or four and is not paid extra, in an open shop he is paid more than other workers, and supervises more people. "The open-shop sees progress as one or two skilled workers in charge of 100 low-wage eighteen-year-olds and just pray no one gets killed!"

Another goal of ABC is to repeal the Davis-Bacon Act. Public relations experts pursuing this goal have been effective in capitalizing on the 'Union as Racist' label, claiming that the Act was an "explicit attempt to limit opportunities for blacks and other minorities" and that this had in fact been its "outstanding accomplishment." Though union leaders find this concern with minority workers less than genuine, and there is evidence that, at least in the Boston area, the union sector is doing somewhat better than the non-union sector in providing training, jobs and stable wage and work rates for

64. Interview with Erlich.

65. Construction Labor Report (Washington D.C.: Bureau of National Affairs, Inc., No. 1016, April 9, 1975), pp.17-19, cited by The Davis-Bacon Act: It Works to Build America (Washington D.C.: The Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO, 1979), p.58.

66. Unions train many more minorities than do non-union programs. Although the non-union program includes 15.8 % minorities, and the unions 14.2%, the non-union sector has only 180 minorities in its programs; the unions have 445. The drop-out rates are also much higher for the non-union sector. The NDEA figures, which being government-regulated should show both sectors at their best, show that the lowest-paid non-union worker earned \$4.97 an hour. The

minorities, such tactics can be quite powerful.

Traditional trade union strength has been eroded by changes in the economy, new technologies and business practices, and an active and aggressive anti-union environment. The next section will describe and analyze how the Massachusetts building trades unions are developing new strategies in order to save union jobs--without giving away the control over wages and working conditions for which the unions have struggled over the years.

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lowest-paid union worker earned \$7.17. Furthermore the non-union wages were more variable. The non-union minority workers are more concentrated in low-paying jobs than are the union workers. There was a -.83 correlation between the percent of minority workers in a non-union trade and wages. For the unions the correlation was only -.65. Lipski, p. 33.

67. I will not here discuss the more traditional political and organizational strategies that the unions are also pursuing with some success. An example is the work preservation clauses won in recent contracts. These clauses prohibit contractors from operating both union and non-union ("double-breasted") companies in the same area. Most people in the trades see this as a major victory, and while I'd agree, I would still consider this a short-term gain, and I want in this paper to discuss strategies which could lead to more substantial institutional and structural changes in the building trades.

SPECIFIC EFFORTS BY LOCAL UNIONS IN
MASSACHUSETTS

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Strategic Investments of Union Pension Funds

The Massachusetts Development Foundation

Given the elements of the craft tradition which have contributed to the present organization of building trade unions, construction workers have been resourceful and adaptable in their responses to changing market conditions and the decline of their unions' influence. This chapter describes some of those responses and addresses some of the political implications of the Boston Area building tradesmen's flexibility in the face of change.

The Boston building trades unions are fighting to protect their jobs from further inroads by non-union contractors with traditional and relatively successful tactics: collective bargaining and militant picketing of non-union construction in the city. But they are now

68. Much of the following section is drawn from Michael Giaimo, Barbara Lipaki, and Elizabeth Strom, "Stragic Investment of Union Pension Funds: The Case of the Boston Bricklayers," unpublished paper, MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Fall, 1984.

realizing that their financial as well as their political strength can be a powerful tool. Thus their new tactics include direct involvement in strategic decision-making, usually the sole prerogative of management.

One of the most exciting innovations, and what Barney Walsh of the carpenter's union describes as "the future of the New England labor movement,"⁶⁹ is the strategic investment of pension funds to encourage union-built projects. Through careful investment, unions can create jobs for their members while complying with the restrictions of ERISA (the Employee Retirement Income and Security Act) and fulfilling their primary commitment to provide benefits to retired workers and their beneficiaries. The Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO estimates that in their industry alone, for every \$100 million invested in union-only⁷⁰ construction projects, 5000 new jobs are created.

This initiative can potentially benefit not only union members, but also unionized construction firms and the communities in which projects are built. Union members

69. Wilfred C. Rogers, "Pension Investing Paying Off," Boston Globe, October 8, 1984, p. 62.

70. Randall Smith, "Use of Pension Funds to Create Union Jobs Raises Issues of Loyalty," Wall Street Journal, January 17, 1984, p.1.

can benefit not only from jobs but also from a better rate of return on their pension fund investment. For example, between 1965 and 1975 the California Pipefitters' return on traditional stock and bond investments was only 1.75 percent, while funds placed in real estate grew by 8.25⁷¹ percent.

Union construction firms can benefit from the extra work and also from the special efforts that the unions and union members will put into ensuring that union-financed jobs are completed on time. Communities can benefit not only from the use value of the projects themselves, but also from spin-off economic activities. They are also likely to benefit from good financial deals arranged by the unions.

Construction workers are in a unique position to make strategic investments. Building trades unions have a legal right, under the Taft-Hartley Act, to manage their funds jointly with representatives of employers groups. This right does not belong to public sector unions or unions representing workers of a single employer (usually large, oligopolistic firms such as those in the auto, steel, and communications industries) who have no legal control over

71. Anita Landecker, "Strategic Pension Fund Investment," unpublished thesis, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, MIT, 1982.

their funds. The initiative for strategic investment of pension funds could lead to the reintegration of the entrepreneurial function which historically belonged to tradesmen. The unions now control much of the labor supply. Through strategic investment they can also influence the demand for their skilled labor.

Eight years ago, several leaders from the Massachusetts Building Trades Council initiated efforts to create what has become the Massachusetts Development Finance Foundation, modeled after a similar institution in southern California. The Development Foundation of Southern California was founded in mid-1980 by trustees of seventeen construction industry unions. These unions, representing 15,000 members, and \$1.75 billion in assets, had committed \$286 million to local, union-only construction projects by January 1984. Each union may buy shares according to their own financial abilities and goals in any of the Foundation projects. These are large building projects, selected to provide union members with work. Over half the projects are residential, with a sales price ceiling imposed by the unions on the houses funded. There is still some confusion about the legality and prudence of these investments, but as yet there is no clear ruling.

72. Landecker, pp. 3-5.

Union leaders were motivated to take this action when they discovered that their pension funds were being used to finance non-union projects in the Sun Belt. "They were using our members' money to put us out of jobs," is the way Walsh described the situation. ⁷³ The Foundation seeks the advice of financial advisors to ensure that investments meet the "prudent investor" regulations of ERISA, and then suggests possible investments. Union locals can participate in Foundation-initiated enterprises by investing in shares on a project-by-project basis which leaves them free to pursue other investments on their own as well. This opportunity for either collective or individual action is therefore in keeping with the strong craft traditions of worker autonomy and independence.

According to Rich Kronish, Executive Director of the Foundation, participants continue to debate its future course, citing several possible strategies for job creation. ⁷⁴ One strategy would be to help developers known to be friendly to union labor by making capital available, perhaps at slightly below-market rates. A second strategy would be to offer financing to developers less sympathetic to union labor, on the condition that they use union labor

73. Ibid.

74. Interview with Rich Kronish.

on the financed project.

It is unclear whether the first strategy would actually create jobs, since it is likely that pro-union developers would have used union labor anyway, and while the second strategy is more likely to create new union jobs, it would probably antagonize pro-union developers with whom the unions have close ties by offering advantages to traditional adversaries, such as members of ABC.

The third, and preferred, strategy is to finance projects that would not have been built at all without the availability of union funds. Unions then offer funding on the condition that the developer employ only union labor. Opportunities to apply this strategy have been relatively rare since it requires a project that has been overlooked by other investment sources yet offers a good, safe return. Also, since the Foundation is not large and can only commit a small percentage of its portfolio to any given development, the project should ideally be one in which a small investment will make a difference.

The Lowell Hilton

Such an opportunity presented itself to the Foundation several years ago in Lowell. Developer Arthur Robbins could not get financing for a proposed \$22 million,

251-room hotel designed as part of a larger package for the redevelopment of downtown Lowell. The initial commitment of \$5.5 million by the Foundation enabled Robbins to negotiate for a federal Urban Development Action Grant, and convince the banks to provide the balance. In exchange for its timely support, the Foundation was able to insist on a percentage of room rental revenue, a percentage of future appreciation and a promise by the developer not to oppose union organization of future hotel employees. In addition, the Foundation obtained a reasonable annual rate of return for the participating locals, and a commitment by the developer to hire union construction workers.

This was a case, says Kronish, where "there was a genuine difference of opinion about the risks involved," and the established banking community was proven wrong in its initial evaluation. ⁷⁵ The fact that the project was completed nineteen days ahead of schedule bodes well for future union-supported projects of this kind. The immediate gains to unions were a good rate of return on their \$5.5 million investment, and 310 new jobs for the members of the 17 locals who participated. More long-term gains will come from the good will toward trades unions created in Lowell, a town with an interesting and

75. Ibid.

particularly militant union history. The Foundation's contractual guarantee for the protection of union hotel jobs typifies the building trades unions' support for the unionization of other sectors.

The Foundation has funded two other commercial developments. The South Shore Shopping Mall in Braintree and an office building in East Cambridge are much smaller projects than the Lowell Hilton, though still the type of commercial projects which are traditionally organized by the unions. By investing in projects outside of the city, the unions are trying to tighten their control over an area in which they have been losing ground. While the primary goal of the Foundation-sponsored projects is union job creation, they serve also to broaden the scope of worker control and to strengthen worker solidarity. They furthermore provide a much-needed opportunity for building trades unions to establish new ties with community groups and thus promote a more positive public image.

Traditional Ties and New Alliances

The ability of the unions to maintain their strength in the city depends not only on maintaining their traditional ties to friends in power, but also on forming new alliances with groups with whom there have been historic animosities. One of the building trades unions'

most durable and important relationships has been with the Archdiocese of Boston--a natural alliance because so many members of the trades are active in their local parishes. A large majority of construction workers in Boston are Irish, Italian and French-Canadian Catholics. Construction workers have therefore volunteered, for example, to rebuild community churches like the Blessed Sacrament in Jamaica Plain, which was partially destroyed by an arsonist's fire.

The Catholic church in Boston has been vocal in supporting the unions politically, by fighting to maintain prevailing wage legislation, and economically, by employing union labor exclusively on their construction projects. This policy has come under aggressive attack by the ABC, who has tried for over two years to convince the archdiocese to reverse its position.⁷⁶ The ABC contractors have charged that by hiring only union construction workers, the Church is discriminating against minority workers. Though a church official defended the union-only policy, saying it was "based on the church's theological teaching, which is pro-worker and, thus, pro-union,"⁷⁷ the accusations continue. One union leader sees the exclusion

76. Bruce A. Mohl, "Union-only Contracts of Archdiocese Scored," The Boston Globe, November 14, 1984, p. 1.

77. Ibid.

of minorities as the biggest problem they have to overcome because it has enabled ABC to capitalize on the unions' racist image.
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Therefore trades unions, led by the Bricklayers, have proposed union-funded projects to community groups--a resourceful response to their need for jobs and a new public image, as well as to the changing base of political power in Boston. While their negotiations with such groups as the Back of the Hill association and the Roxbury Multi-Service Center were economically inspired, the implications of this new contact are far-reaching, as will become clear in the following discussions.

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Back of the Hill

The Foundation is not primarily interested in investing their funds in residential construction, which has been primarily non-union for some time. The Bricklayers Local 3 in Boston, however, is one Foundation member that has indicated an interest in investing its funds in residential projects located in communities within the Boston city limits. The Bricklayers Local 3 is smaller

78. Interview with McIntyre.

79. Much of this section is drawn from Giacomo, Lipski and Strom.

than most other construction unions, and therefore feels that the specific needs of their members are not always adequately addressed through the Foundation. Though they did participate in the Lowell and East Cambridge projects located within their geographic jurisdiction, they felt that the Back of the Hill project would better address their specific needs. They therefore entered into discussions with the community independent of other unions. In the spring of 1983, Tommy McIntyre of the Bricklayers union approached the Back of the Hill Community Development Association (BOTHCDA) and expressed interest in working with the community to develop 100 units of low- and moderate-income brick-built housing.

The Back of the Hill is a racially mixed neighborhood in the Roxbury section of Boston of about 540 people. BOTHCDA was formed in 1972 by an ad hoc neighborhood coalition in response to the destruction of homes by institutions in the area during the past fifteen years. One of these institutions, Lahey Clinic, in anticipation of a plan to build a facility in the neighborhood, acquired 40 houses and 10 acres of land. 39 of these homes had been torn down before the decision was made to relocate the entire facility in Burlington. BOTHCDA was able to generate enough unfavorable publicity over the destruction and abandonment of their neighborhood to convince Lahey Clinic

to agree to give them the first option to buy the Lahey land, at a reasonable price. The Back of the Hill group has also shown its ability to stabilize the neighborhood by its development, in conjunction with HUD, of 125 units of rent-subsidized apartments for elderly and handicapped area residents. They are justifiably proud of this project and, aware of the continuing housing crisis, are motivated to work with the Bricklayers to develop more housing on the site of the Lahey land.

No doubt part of the motivation of the Bricklayers for the selection of this neighborhood was a response to the fact that BOTHCDA was at the time also negotiating with the city's Neighborhood Development and Employment Agency (NDEA) to build, on a site close to the proposed brick units, eighteen units which were a part of a "Manufactured Housing Initiative." The fact that NDEA has recently been promoting the use of manufactured housing in Dorchester and Jamaica Plain, as well as on the Back of the Hill, has been of concern to the local building trades unions who see a growing trend of city support for non-union construction. ⁸⁰

The unions are troubled not only by the loss of potential union jobs, but also by the fact, noted in the

80. The proportion of non-union work granted by the city between 1983 and the first quarter of 1985 rose from 13 percent to 20 percent.[NDEA figures]

previous section of the paper, that the manufactured housing is built out of state, by predominantly young minimum-wage workers in New Hampshire. Essentially, Local 3 hopes to convince community groups to build brick rather than manufactured homes by presenting the following proposals: The union will arrange construction loan financing at a point or two below market rate, and will supply apprenticeship positions for local residents. In exchange, the community's development will employ union bricklayers.

The union and the community agree that brick-built homes are preferable aesthetically and functionally. The union has also been able to demonstrate that though at first glance, cost differences appear prohibitively large, a closer analysis reveals that the costs are actually comparable from the standpoint of the family income necessary to purchase one of the proposed homes. An 1100-square-foot manufactured house is estimated to cost \$63,063. The same size brick-built house is estimated at about \$71,278. We can assume that both families are able to get the MHFA 10.65-percent, thirty-year mortgage (now available under the Manufactured Housing Initiative) and that both families put 5 percent of the purchase down on their homes. We can also assume, conservatively, that a family spends a quarter of its income on housing. A family

needs to earn at least \$26,628 a year to afford the manufactured home, and \$30,096 to afford the brick-built house.⁸¹ Neither family would qualify as low-income, and both would be considered from the same income class.

In addition, by using their pension funds as leverage to encourage a bank to offer below-market-rate construction financing, the Bricklayers can help to offset the cost disadvantage that does exist for the housing they wish to supply. The union plans to arrange to deposit a substantial portion of its pension assets in a local bank, in exchange for the bank's willingness to finance the community project at a point or two below market rates. The Bricklayers currently have their \$8 million pension fund and their \$2 million annuity fund invested through the Boston Trust, where 60 percent of the funds are invested in fixed investments and 40 percent in equity. No investments are made in foreign or anti-union companies. It is possible that the International Bricklayers Union may also be convinced to invest part of its \$20 million in a suitable project.

The Bricklayers can also provide another necessary service to the community. BOTHCDA does not have the up-front money to pay architects and engineers to plan for a

81. Giaimo, et al., p. 45.

project, especially a project with a very high risk of not going forward. The Bricklayers can provide the actual packaging of the development plan. Not only can they raise the necessary money, but in doing so they can indicate to BOTHCDA that the union is committed to this project and has confidence that it will be satisfactorily negotiated.

What has blocked the progress of this promising venture, however, is the continuing perception by many community members that the unions do not show respect for the community's right to determine the shape of their neighborhood. BOTHCDA members feel that they are often excluded from important decisions. Some leaders in minority communities doubt the feasibility of a relationship between a Boston construction union and a black and Hispanic community. At this point each group has expressed reservations about the sincerity of the other group and, while realizing that a partnership would benefit all involved, wants the other side to make the next move to prove its intent to be truly cooperative. One member of BOTHCDA said that they would "love to get the Lahey [Clinic] land developed, and would meet any time, any place" to get the project going. Although the Bricklayers and Back of the Hill residents both say they

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82. Interview with Steve Norris, BOTHCDA member.

are still interested in the project, which has obvious benefits for each group, discussions have at least temporarily been suspended.

The Back of the Hill project is but one example of how historic union-community antagonisms thwart efforts which could be mutually beneficial. Despite the fact that their project has been temporarily shelved, the Bricklayers have learned, from their experience with the Back of the Hill Community, not only the importance of trying to build solid relations with community groups, but also some of the mechanics of putting together a project to build affordable housing for Boston's communities.

South Boston

The Bricklayers have recently made an agreement with the city to build 17 brick row-houses in the Andrews Square neighborhood of South Boston. Although the negotiations were with the city, rather than directly with the community, many aspects of the Back of the Hill project have been incorporated into this development.

These houses, like those proposed for the Back of the Hill, will be 1100 square feet and will cost about \$65,000. In both cases the factors keeping the cost down are the availability of cheap land and below-market construction

loans facilitated by leveraging the union's pension funds. Since one of the problems of the Back of the Hill project was the inability to find a suitable developer, the Bricklayers have now taken a bold step and have proposed to take on this role themselves. They feel that they have the expertise to coordinate the project and maintain that this will enable them to waive the developer's fees, "bypassing the profiteers" and thus making housing affordable to residents of the area. The estimated saving on each house could be from \$1000 to \$2500.

By demonstrating the benefits of their plan, the Bricklayers hope to ensure that city and state policies now favorable to manufactured housing can be altered to favor union-built housing. In addition to keeping costs affordable and building quality housing, the union can also guarantee a number of apprenticeship jobs to community residents.⁸³ Thus the union not only creates immediate jobs for their members, but also changes the climate to be more positive toward union-built housing in the future.

83. This job is very roughly calculated to create approximately 34 six-month jobs, but it's likely that there will be a small group of bricklayers working for only a few weeks. Clearly, not many apprenticeships will be created by this project, but if the union takes on a number of apprentices for this job, these new workers will have the opportunity of a full four year program. Source of calculations was John Rowse, Architect.

Proposal to the Roxbury Multi-Service Center

Last fall Tommy McIntyre of the Bricklayers union called together several building trades leaders to meet with people from the Roxbury Multi-Service Center to discuss the possibility of rehabilitating 99 housing units in the mainly black neighborhood. The unions emphasized, as they had with the Back of the Hill group, that it would cost nearly the same amount to hire competent union workers as poorly trained and less productive non-union workers. The main advantage to the community of employing union workers would have been the provision of a number of apprenticeship positions to Roxbury residents. McIntyre talked about the need for a long-range approach to the planning process: the possibility of building affordable housing while also providing well-paying, stable jobs for union workers.

The meeting marked the unions' recognition of the growing power of community groups like the Roxbury Multi-Service Center to recommend or reject city-sponsored contracts. More significant than the proposed contract for the 99 units, then, was the unions' decision to try to improve their relations with the minority communities in the city. Instead of relying on old alliances with the church and politicians in power, the white union leaders had begun to communicate with former adversaries like Chuck

Turner, one of the leading forces in the formation of the Third World Jobs clearing house and the Boston Jobs Ordinance.

Turner directly confronted the union leaders with accusations of past and continuing racism, and claimed that the unions had a "credibility problem." There followed an open and exhaustive debate over issues such as Boston Jobs Ordinance, affordable housing, and union jobs. Several months later, Mayor Flynn appointed both McIntyre and Turner to the committee responsible for monitoring the enforcement of the Boston Jobs Ordinance. Rumor has it that the relationship between Turner and McIntyre has improved, and that one reason for this is the unions' suspension of action on their suit against the Boston Jobs Ordinance. If this rumor proves to be true, it is significant that the unions are willing to forgo what they feel is their jurisdiction over Boston jobs, in order to better relate to community groups.

The establishment of the Massachusetts Development Finance Foundation and the Bricklayers' initiatives show that the building trades, as a group or as individual locals, can make investment decisions usually reserved for management. Their assumption of the entrepreneurial roles of financier and developer is made possible by the craftsmanlike ability to understand and coordinate the

tasks of a complete building project. This ability has been further tested in their recent experiences coordinating volunteer projects, such as Rosie's Place.

Rosie's Place

In further efforts to improve their image and their community ties, The building trades unions have begun to form new alliances with groups like Rosie's Place, an independent and well-respected shelter for poor and homeless women in Boston's South End. Sue Costa, one of Rosie's board members, estimated that more than \$120,000 in labor and materials had been contributed by union workers to rebuild a five-story residence that was destroyed by an arsonist's fire last year. Union members have also rehabilitated at least one other shelter in Roxbury and have pledged to donate their time and skills to build a second shelter for Rosie's. When asked how difficult it was to get construction workers to volunteer their time on these projects, Tommy McIntyre said that union officials found it easy, that generosity was part of the workers' character and that all leaders had to do was to "tap their generosity." Of course when a union business agent asks

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84. Jeremiah V. Murphy, "Restored Rosie's Place Has Open House," Boston Globe, April 28, 1985, p. 44.

85. Interview with McIntyre.

members to generously volunteer to work at Rosie's, they are likely to respond positively.

While projects like the rehabilitation of Rosie's Place help to create favorable publicity for the unions, they also reinforce the skills that are necessary for the unions' role as developers in projects like the one in South Boston. Though union workers participate in cooperative planning in their work crews, it has been generations since they have assumed all of the functions of a developer. Yet at Rosie's leaders from each craft gathered informally to plan the timing and responsibilities for the delivery of materials, equipment and labor. The head of the Laborers' local promised to borrow dumpsters from a union contractor doing work in the area. The Bricklayers promised to get a contractor to donate mixes and machines to do the masonry work. The Operating Engineers promised to have a "cherry picker" available at the appropriate time. A schedule was roughly drawn: The Laborers would go in first to prepare the building, the carpenters would work the next week, and so on. Tommy McIntyre took on the overall coordination of the project.

Because this was a volunteer job, there were practical solutions to what otherwise may have been disputes over jurisdiction. There were some complaints from architects who were hired to work with the tradesmen

at Rosie's that materials and labor were not well-coordinated. While much of this problem can be attributed to the difficulties of using volunteer labor, it is true that formal planning at strategic levels is an ability that must be improved upon if the unions are to be successful developers.

Organizing and Coalition-Building

The unions' outreach to potential new allies like the Roxbury Multi-Service Center or Rosie's Place is reminiscent of their historic link with the Catholic church in that both efforts are motivated by political and social considerations, rather than immediate economic needs alone. Union members will ultimately benefit from the experience of coordinating projects and the positive publicity from their efforts. Union leaders have emphasized, however, that though good relationships with communities are important, tradesmen cannot give up their traditional reliance on collective bargaining strength to promote the common welfare of their members.

Members of industrial and service sector unions have taken the lead in organizing broad political groups that link labor's concerns to those of other communities. An example of this in Boston is the Labor Support Project (LSP), a network of unionists that formed in response to

the Greyhound strike. The LSP alerts members when there is a local strike in need of extra pickets or financial assistance. It also trains them on the use of video equipment so that they can publicize the work of their locals to Boston's communities as well as to their own memberships. Members of the LSP participated in and were arrested with leaders of TransAfrica for occupying Deak-Perera, a local Krugerrand dealership, and organized a May Day rally in support of the South African workers.

It is to the credit of local building trades leaders that they recognize the need to work with and learn from others. Building trades leaders have been able to transcend traditional jurisdictional independence in order to show support for other labor sectors. Tom Evers, for example, spoke at the May Day demonstration--even though the rally was not organized or even well-attended by construction union members. A machinist told me that when he was collecting for the striking British miners this winter, the construction workers could always be counted on for their generosity. At the Greyhound rally where 5000 unionists demonstrated in solidarity with the striking drivers, 4500 of the demonstrators were from the building

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86. Interview with Tom Grouper.

87. Interview with Evers.

trades.

This broad political activity has not always been encouraged. Samuel Gompers, the leader of the AFL from its inception is best-known for his "business union" philosophy--that is, "the union combined the principles of fraternal organizations (an injury to one is an injury to all) with business organizations (the task of the unions is to secure the highest possible wages that the market will bear)."⁸⁸

He maintained that labor movement could succeed only by relying on its own resources, and that political or social ideals that went beyond the immediate demands of workers were not only irrelevant but detrimental to their interests. In other words, he supported a "pure and simple"⁸⁹ brand of unionism.

Piore points out that with the rise of the industrial unions, the Gomper ideology faded, and that labor in fact gained its power because of its new role as the "spearhead"⁹⁰ of a broad progressive alliance." He therefore attributes the recent decline of union strength with the

88. Stanley Aronowitz, Working Class Hero: A New Strategy for Labor (New York: Adama Books, 1983), p. 11.

89. Ibid.

90. Michael J. Piore, "Can Labor Survive Re-Gomperization?" in Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth Annual Meeting, Madison, WI: 1951, p. 37.

"re-Gomperization" of the movement after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, when labor "found itself suddenly in conflict with the other members of the coalition; legislation for blacks, women, the environment, and even health and safety began to conflict with the provisions of collective agreements," and retreated to the pursuit of the narrow interests of their immediate constituency.⁹¹ The activities of groups like the LSP can counteract what Piore calls "re-Gomperization."

It is the flexibility of the building trades unions, along with the motivation of hard times, that enables them to suspend their customary aloofness to social and community movements today. Tradesmen have always been strong supporters of labor; it is rare, for example, that a construction worker would ever cross any picket line. What's new is their alliance with broader political movements. Crafts unions have been criticized primarily for their political isolation and for their exclusion of minority groups from their own ranks, but this political backwardness is not necessarily inherent to crafts organizations. The fact that they are beginning to reach out to community and minority groups attests to their ability to change customs or rules in order to save old

91. Ibid.

jobs, create new jobs, and preserve the essence of the craft tradition--not exclusion and divisiveness, but autonomy and equality, which now are necessary to preserve craft unionism.

WHAT CAN BE
LEARNED?

When I asked Walter Ryan of the Operating Engineers if he could characterize the union strategy of the building trades, he said, "In typical building trades' fashion: the strategy is unformulated." When I asked Tommy McIntyre of the Bricklayers Union the same question, he said, "There's no real plan; we just seize the opportunity." These statements characterize the nature of the building trades as well as their union strategy-- autonomous, flexible and sometimes unpredictable. What then might be generalized from this workforce to be applied to industrial or service sector unions?

Many workers pride themselves on their broad knowledge and ability to learn new skills quickly and enjoy solving problems they haven't encountered before. High-tech workers and those in the service sector possess the resourcefulness that has been the essence of the craft tradition. Because their jobs depend on changing market forces, they may move from employer to employer and from method to method. Therefore their self-definition must

come from an identification with their craft rather than with their employer: they are engineers rather than Data General employees, homemakers rather than maids for ever-changing households. All of these workers also share the construction workers' vulnerability to changing cycles of the economy and the immediate needs of employers. Furthermore their jobs are often of short duration and geographically dispersed, which makes traditional organization along industrial lines all but impossible. Though not all U.S. workers share the characteristics and problems of the craft tradition, a model of craft unionism⁹² could be broadly, if not universally, applicable.

The primary goals of unions are to maintain high and stable wages and to guarantee job security for their members. In craft unions, these goals can be met by eliminating competition for wages and thus for jobs, so that workers need not choose between bidding for the lowest wages and losing their jobs to other workers, often

92. Piore and Sabel claim it is likely that, in response to the crisis of fragmented and unstable markets, there will be a massive reorganization of American industrial structure which will move away from mass-production techniques, and toward small batch production of specialized products. This new production paradigm in many ways resembles what we now know as craft production, and thus we may include workers whose jobs are affected by these changes in our list of workers who can be organized according to a crafts union model. Piore and Sabel, pp.105-133.

unskilled, who are "willing and able" to work for less money. Keeping wages out of competition also assures employers^{of} the ready availability of skilled workers who can be employed as they are needed rather than full time.

Controlling the Labor Supply

Training Programs

In order to control the supply of skilled labor, craft unions must control the supply skills. That is, they must guard the means by which craft workers gain the skills needed for high-quality, efficient production. The long tradition of apprenticeship training in the building trades does, in effect, precisely this. Other work sectors would benefit by instituting training programs appropriate to their crafts.

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According to Rand Wilson, an organizer for the Communication Workers of America (CWA), one way to organize the high-tech industry is to run educational programs for members of various trades. Groups of installers, engineers, technicians and programmers could be involved in programs to upgrade skills, set standards of competence and

93. Interview with Rand Wilson, CWA.

accreditation, and become familiar with the health and safety issues of their respective jobs. Ideally, the company would fund the programs, and the union would design and run them, as in the building trades. Currently the companies sponsor training programs, but Wilson suggests that union sponsorship would create more program consistency, more worker participation, and stronger worker allegiance to the union. Job referral and information-sharing could be organized along similar lines.

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Mike Hillard, who has been active in organizing high-tech engineers, says that engineers have traditionally identified with management, but are now seeing their careers threatened. They need to maintain a rapidly changing base of skills if they want to keep their jobs. Jobs in the 1970's depended on knowledge of computer hardware, in the early 1980's on systems software and office automation, and now on communications. Engineers are becoming a mobile labor force. Projects typically last two to three years, after which an engineer who doesn't have the opportunity to move up in the firm must find other work. Just as years ago the production of windows and doors was moved from the domain of the craft carpenter,

94. Interview with Mike Hillard, member of High Tech Research Group.

today the least skilled parts of an engineer's job are being automated and moved out of his or her jurisdiction. Engineers are one group that would be able to resist threats to their rights on the job if they had access to the re-training union programs could offer.

If these training programs achieved the respectability necessary to set their own standards of accreditation, as the building trades have done, much of the non-union competition for jobs would be eliminated and high wages would be maintained. Even if training programs could not achieve this level of control, they would serve as an effective educating and organizing mechanism.

Equal Wage Rates and Job Rotation

A less direct, but no less important, mechanism for eliminating wage competition and resisting employers' attempts to divide workers would be the elimination of personal and professional competition between workers. Building trades unions do this by maintaining equal wage rates and rotating jobs among workers in the same craft. Because foremen are included in the bargaining unit with other workers in the craft, worker solidarity is fostered.

Although current legal restrictions prevent the inclusion of managers in the bargaining units of

industrially organized unions, in some cases workers are demonstrating their awareness of the need for formal equity between workers. The pilots at United Airlines are currently on strike to prevent the institution of a two-tiered wage system, whereby workers now in the bargaining unit would be paid at a higher rate than workers yet to be hired. The strike reflects the awareness that if some workers are paid less than others, even those equally or more skilled, the subsequent competition for wages will threaten the jobs of the higher-paid workers, who will likely be replaced by lower-paid workers.

Pay for Knowledge and Opportunity to Use Knowledge

Maintaining control over training and hiring institutions can be achieved only if jobs are broadly defined. If jobs are divided into discrete tasks, skilled workers can easily be replaced by unskilled and less costly workers, and the value of a broadly skilled worker to a job is diminished. Therefore the building tradesmen insist on work rules prohibiting workers not trained in the craft from performing what tasks are part of the craft job.

In the years spent in apprenticeship training programs and on the job, workers accumulate the knowledge they need to creatively solve almost any problem relating to their craft and to apply their skills in the use of any

new tool, technique or material. The opportunity to use this knowledge is a chief goal for craft workers, who take pride in the challenge and variety of their work. Craftsmanlike skill is the basis for the broad job definitions essential to a workforce's ability to work well and efficiently and to keep up with swiftly changing job requirements. A workforce with this ability can be indispensable to its employer: in this way, broad job definition fosters employer dependence on craft workers.

A good example of the importance of broad job classifications is the situation described by Linda Buchanan, a machinist at the Pratt and Whitney plant where aircraft engines are produced. She is assigned to work with numerically controlled equipment which combines what were three to six milling and drilling operations into one. The introduction of this new technology and the reorganization of the jobs have put machinists out of work and restructured the jobs of the remaining workers, who have been assigned to the new equipment. Despite their broad training and experience in on-the-job problem-solving, they are not permitted by the company to edit or reprogram the tapes that run the machines. They

95. The following information is from a series of interviews with Linda Buchanan, a machinist at Pratt & Whitney, and a member of the IAM Local 1746.

merely load the machines, monitor their progress and check the dimensions of the finished pieces. Even though after only a few months the machinists have picked up the knowledge needed to do the reprogramming themselves, they are supposed to call a programmer or engineer to solve any problem that arises. There are even locks on the machines so the machinists have no access to the tapes. The reason for this, according to the foremen, is the company's fear of sabotage. But since foremen are responsible for keeping up productivity rates, they in fact look the other way when the machinists use keys they've managed to acquire to unlock the equipment and do the necessary editing.

Thus in order to maintain the satisfaction craft workers need to feel in control of a job, the machinists informally break the very work rules designed to help protect their jobs. Just as on a simple job a carpenter may prefer to install an electrical outlet, these machinists act to extend the use of their skills.

Yet the machinists' union is trying to maintain job control by claiming jurisdiction over both machinists' and programmers' jobs, rather than trying to include both in one job classification. Although the building trades are also hampered by rigid jurisdictional boundaries, they routinely ignore work rules, knowing that performance of a variety of tasks will enhance pride in their work. What

the machinists and other craft-like workers need is a mechanism for modifying job descriptions that will allow job flexibility without giving up what protection work rules afford.

At present, the company as well as the union is working against its own best interests, limiting efficiency by limiting the flexibility of workers' functions. Therefore, I propose a modification of the practices now used in the building trades, whereby jurisdictional boundaries and work rules, while specifically defined in contracts, could be altered in certain circumstances when both parties agreed.

The increased job flexibility that would result if craft classifications were combined into fewer categories would cause fewer intra-union disputes than would the mere relaxation of jurisdictional boundaries. Employers who currently divide tasks to limit workers' control would be benefited by improved productivity and product quality. When a flexible mode of production is in use, it makes sense to employ a flexible workforce. Work assignments and salaries should therefore be determined by knowledge of skills, not by performance of specific tasks. The latter system is not only demoralizing for skilled workers, but inefficient and ultimately unsound for employers.

Work Rules: Flexibility and Protection

A paradox of workers' efforts to maintain job control and the capacity for flexibility lies in the establishment of apparently rigid work rules. Though at first these rules seem to restrict the rights of workers to reprogram a machine or to help a fellow craftsman install an electrical outlet, in fact they allow workers or unions to bargain away these rights on individual projects, as construction unions do, when the workers feel there is something to be gained by the concession.

Since work rules are often modified either formally or informally, the worker can even use the right to "work to rule" as an effective means of power over and employer. If a machinist, for example, had this power, he or she could, on a case-by-case basis, assume duties not included in the usual job description. Buchanan, for example, would be able to judge for herself whether or not her capabilities and job responsibilities would permit her to reprogram her machines. The option to modify work rules would serve to reinforce the decision-making skill of the craft worker, and so is quite different from the "job-control" unionism currently prevalent in the industrial unions.

Teachers in Newton give us another example of how collectively bargained work rules can be useful in both direct and indirect ways. ⁹⁶ Newton teachers have a clause in their contract exempting them from formal responsibility to stay after school to attend parent meetings or to run school clubs. Of course teachers customarily disregard this rule because they define their job as more than classroom instruction. But it's important for teachers to know that they are voluntarily putting in extra hours rather than having extra duties externally imposed. Such rules have become a bargaining chip in winning more concrete contract gains for teachers. Last winter, Newton teachers refused to perform any of their customary extra-curricular activities as they "worked to rule" in order to pressure the school department to concede wage gains. This flexible use of rules by skilled workers responsible for a broad range of tasks is an important tool of craft unionism.

Broad job classifications combined with stricter work rules protect workers and offer flexibility to management. In many small shops and sometimes in large ones, informal suspension of rules is the norm. But if the protection

96. The following information was gathered in a series of interviews with Jim Johns, a Newton teacher and member of the negotiating committee of the Newton Teachers' Association (NTA).

offered by the rules is to be meaningful, more formal mechanisms will have to be developed to change contractual agreements quickly but not arbitrarily. In the building trades, shop stewards redefine work rules on a daily basis, and business agents have the authority to modify contracts for the duration of specific projects. Because both are elected to their positions, their attention to the needs of workers is assured, and their decisions are honored by employers, who recognize the threat of a strike.

Though these mechanisms may not be appropriate for all craft workers, a mechanism which facilitates worker or worker-representative control must be instituted to replace the usual tedious grievance and arbitration method now used when workers resist management decisions to change the work rules. There are several options for appropriate mechanisms for worker participation in modifying rules or settling minor disputes. If shop stewards are not now assigned to all work-sites, perhaps rotating worker committees could be formed to officially sanction the temporary suspension or modification of work rules. In order for these shop stewards or worker committees to make intelligent decisions, they will need to have access to information usually accessible only to management. This implies a trade-off, for a willingness to incorporate mechanisms permitting flexibility assumes a certain amount

of management prerogative.

"Co-Determination": Labor Influence on Management
Decisions

Lines between labor and management have traditionally blurred among craft workers. Construction workers, day care workers, and computer programmers all more or less manage themselves. Sometimes self-employed, sometimes employed by major firms or by sub-contractors, craft workers have the experience to enter effectively into management activities. Managers in large companies are more and more willing to include workers formally in management decisions; those in small firms usually allow informal participation.

The movement toward "co-determination" is evident in the institution of quality of work life (QWL) programs and labor-management teams, and even union participation on company boards. John Joyce of the Bricklayers finds it ironic that advocates of these "new" institutions have not paid more attention to the building trades, where direct

97. John T. Joyce, "Codetermination, Collective Bargaining and Worker Participation in the Construction Industry," in Kochan, p. 259.

worker participation is "old hat." Building trades workers may influence any decision, from the deployment of workers to the investment of pension funds; their right to involvement, derived from custom, is institutionalized in collective bargaining agreements. Joyce feels that all unions should expand the potential of collective bargaining by including provisions for workers to influence strategic and shop floor decisions. He contends that legal distinctions between "mandatory" and "permissible" subjects of bargaining are artificial. Joyce cautions that

the central lesson to be drawn from the building trades experience with worker participation is that such participation is meaningful only when it arises from the workers' own self-organization: without strong, vital trade unions to express the workers' needs, one can have the appearance, but not the substance, of worker involvement.

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Joyce's advice is consistent with the findings of a study by Kochan, Katz, and Mower. Their study suggests that those worker-participation programs which resulted in real improvements in workers' views of both their jobs and their unions were programs in which the union was a visible joint partner. In those cases, the process that led to actual changes in work organization and union support for QWL was

98. Ibid., p. 261.

99. Ibid., p. 270.

linked to larger collective bargaining and representational
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strategies.

Workers' managerial functions have recently expanded even beyond relationships with current management, helping the effort to save and create jobs in a variety of ways. In order to influence the expansion of their industry and thereby stimulate demand for their skills, the leadership of the Communication Workers^{of} America (CWA) recently initiated research about the feasibility of creating a
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worker-owned company to promote cable television. Meanwhile, steelworkers in Pennsylvania's "Mon Valley" are trying to salvage their jobs by creating a municipal authority which would have the power to take over the local facilities now closed by the companies, by the power of
102
eminent domain.

Both efforts are reminiscent of the worker-controlled investment of pension funds that protects and creates jobs for building trades union members. Other unions representing employees at large companies do not at this

100. Thomas A. Kochan, Harry C. Katz, and Nancy R. Mower, "Worker Participation and American Unions," in Kochan, p. 288.

101. Interview with Wilson

102. Judy Rusakowski and Jim Benn, "Tri-State Coalition Fights to save the "Mon Valley," Labor Notes, April 1985, pp.9-10.

point have the legal right to manage their pension funds jointly with their employers and therefore cannot use their financial leverage to create or salvage union jobs, but this management right has become fair game for collective bargaining agreements. In contract negotiations with Chrysler and Eastern Airlines, workers have agreed to wage concessions only after gaining the right to be represented on pension trust committees. ¹⁰³ Bold initiatives such as these, though not a formal aspect of the craft union model, demonstrate the independent, problem-solving character of craftsmen, which is fostered by organization along craft lines.

The effect of the blurring of labor-management lines made possible by the institution of craft unionism is twofold. First, worker participation in management decision-making gives unions access to the information they need to make intelligent decisions about modifying work rules and to create more long-term strategies for the protection of workers. (Their participation also gives employers access to workers' insights about management.) Second, workers can develop the means to save or create their own jobs when management is unable or unwilling to do

103. James P. Northrup and Herbert R. Northrup, "Union Divergent Investing of Pensions: A Power, Non-Employee Relations Issue," Journal of Labor Research (Fall, 1981), cited in Giaimo, Lipski and Strom, p. 13.

80.

Conclusion

Organized labor is at a crossroads. It will not be able to recapture its strength unless it can respond appropriately to changes in the labor force and the reorganization of production methods and technologies. The keys to an effective response are the flexibility, autonomy, and non-competition inherent in the craft tradition. As we saw in Chapter One, these elements of craft production became both the foundation and the result of the unionization of the building trades. They allowed the development of a union organization that has afforded workers extensive control over the supply of construction labor, broad job definitions and jurisdictions, mechanisms for the modification and suspension of work rules, and involvement in managerial decisions.

The trades unions have had to adjust their approach, as was demonstrated in Chapter Two, to meet the demands of a changing market. They have capitalized on union traditions, such as apprenticeship training, that continue to further their goals of job autonomy and stable,

adequate employment and wages; and they have begun to abandon the union practices, such as exclusion, that thwart their efforts to rebuild union strength.

What the building trades arrived at serendipitously is the basis for a model of craft unionism, which with some adjustments, could be instituted by other sectors. Workers who share the characteristics of traditional craftsmen--skill, broad training, autonomy, mobility and vulnerability to market fluctuations-- would be well-served by the craft union model, as is implied by the specific applications of craft unionism described in this chapter. To facilitate craft unionization, activists must also win the legal prerogative to organize along craft lines rather than industrial lines. That is, they must garner the political support needed to lift current legal restrictions on the determination of bargaining units and the range of negotiable issues now under management control.

Many unions are already incorporating elements of craft unionism into their strategies. My intent has been to incorporate these elements in a workable craft model so that unions can systematically apply craft strategies where they are appropriate. In this way workers may be able to achieve the many levels of self-determination that will allow them to organize as flexible, productive workforces in a changeable economy.

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