

The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

I was lucky. I was indentured to a good contractor, who actually had taken another woman from my class as an apprentice. I was teamed up with a journeyman who became a very good friend; he really taught me. He used to say, “The more I teach you, the less I have to do.” I wish there were more people like that. Whether it be a man or woman, you have to realize that apprentices are the future. They’re going to keep the industry going, they’re going to keep your union going, they’re going to keep the trade going. I wish more people thought that way.

There are a couple of options when you know you are not wanted. You can ignore it and just try to do the best you can and when you do find that one person who is willing to teach you, absorb as much as you can. Try to find an ally, there’s usually always somebody on the job, if it’s another female, that’s perfect, especially if it’s a female who’s a journeywoman. That helps.

But it can be anybody, anybody you can see as an ally that you can talk to. If you don’t have that on the job or in the company you work for, or even your union, find a tradeswomen group and get together. A lot of the tradeswomen groups across the country get together outside of work and it really is a place to talk to those women who’ve been doing it for 20 years. It’s a support group; it’s kind of learning how to maneuver and what to do.

The first few weeks I was on the job, I came home and soaked in a bath tub. I was just barely able to get out of bed the next morning. But your body gets used to it. And sometimes when people wonder if women are strong enough, I tell them that there were times on the job when I was stronger than the 63-year-old guy I was working with who was getting ready to retire, who had been doing it for 35 years and his body was so beat up or the new 18-year-old apprentice whose body wasn’t used to the physical work. So that’s my argument to that.

Joining the United Association

Part of the reason I got interested in the union was my mentor, the journeyman I was teamed up with. He told me, “Go to every union meeting because this is your livelihood. We make the kind of money we do because we have a union doing the bargaining for us.” And then he also said, “Go because you can get to know people. So, if you walk on another job you recognize somebody. Somebody knows you, you know them.”

So, I started going. He used to save me a seat next to him, he would introduce me to everybody he knew. When I became a journeywoman, I decided to run for office. The first time I ran, I ran for a trustee. I did not win. Then I ran for the Executive Board and I did win that election.

It was an honor. I served one term on the executive board and got elected to another term and then some people decided to leave their positions so we had another

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election. That's when I ran for president. I was elected and currently in my third term as president.

Recruiting Women in the Trades

On the job, it's just the comments or the side things or, you know, somebody writing things about you in a porta john or somewhere on the job. That's the biggest thing. As far as an in- your-face type thing, I really didn't have a lot of that. You have to make decisions as they happen. It takes a certain attitude to succeed.

Our union was very progressive, ahead of the game. I became a journeywoman in 2003 and in 2004, the business manager union and training director approached me and said, "Would you be interested in putting together a harassment class?" It's a four-hour class; it's given to the first-year apprentices, so, since 2004, all of our apprentices have received this training.

We've had a Cleveland Building Trades Tradeswomen's Committee for about five years now. A female carpenter and I both knew that a lot of times when it comes to tradeswomen, things don't work unless you can get somebody behind you.

So, we actually approached the Cleveland Building and Construction Trades Council. There was a new executive director and he was younger so we thought this was a perfect time to make a change. We approached him, wrote a proposal, and they approved it. Over the past two years we've held career fairs open to everybody and we've actually pulled in more women when we have these huge career fairs than when we have career fairs geared just toward recruiting women. The last career fair in Cleveland, we had a little over 300 people show up and there were over 50 women.

When we outreach to women obviously it's all tradeswomen talking to them. Even at the big career fairs, all the trades bring their tradeswomen. A lot of the women who come to the fairs want to talk to that woman one-on-one and we get questions like "What's it like being a woman on the jobsite?" And I answer: If you're willing to work and do the same work as the guy next to you and put in the time then, you know, you're going to be all right. I'm also very blunt about how hard it is and that you have to realize that you're going to get dirty and about the atmosphere on the jobsite. You know, realize that there's no restrooms there. As much as it's strange to talk about the porta johns on the job, that's a big problem for the women.

Advice for Apprenticeship Candidates

There's no greater feeling than working with your hands and completing something and being able to step back and say, "Wow, I did that." It definitely is true that the women who get in the trades and graduate out of the apprenticeship program have great confidence. It's definitely a confidence builder.

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This failure to practice the democracy trade unions preached did not help the building trades in the 1960s and 70s, as far as the public was concerned, and neither did their militant strike policy. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the construction industry averaged 932 work stoppages a year between 1966 and 1969, with wage settlement (including benefits) rising steadily from 6.4 percent in 1966 to 14 percent in 1969. “Fat and sassy” building trades unions, which represented 55 percent of full-time construction workers in the mid-1960s, were taking full advantage of their economic power, enraging their critics and their countrymen. “You cannot increase . . . construction wages 50 to 60 percent in three years . . . without changing the nature of the United States,” a corporate leader complained to Congress. “The No. 1 domestic problem in the country is the effect of the wage push on the total lives of everyone.”

Fearing that rising building-trades rates would trigger a rise in manufacturing wages, major corporations, national contractors, and construction industry executives decided to take action. In 1969, they launched the Construction Users Anti-Inflation Roundtable (which merged with the Business Round Table in 1972), intending to undermine local union power, increase productivity, control wage rates, and ultimately break the union’s hold on apprenticeship training and skilled manpower. By promoting the use of open-shop or “merit” contractors, like those affiliated with the rabidly anti-union Associated Builders and Contractors (founded in 1950), they hoped to reverse prevailing wage laws, eliminate traditional trade jurisdiction, and basically disrupt the unionized construction industry.

Their strategy was more promising in the 1970s than ever before, thanks to the availability of a wide range of prefabricated materials, new labor-saving technologies, and a steady

supply of semi-skilled workers who had been shut out of unions for years. The fact that the post-war construction boom was collapsing in the early ‘70s also boosted nonunion chances – skilled mechanics with mortgages to pay and families to feed did what they had to do to survive; that is, they “put their card in their shoe,” as one union leader put it, and provided the skilled labor that nonunion firms had lacked in the past. Before too long, nonunion firms were doing 32 percent of non-residential industrial construction, twice the percentage they had claimed in 1969 and “double breasted” union/nonunion firms (which had been sanctioned by the NLRB in 1973) now allowed contractors to use building trades hiring halls when they needed skilled workers to meet a tight deadline, and to subcontract work out to nonunion shops when they did not.

By the 1980s, it looked as if the Business Roundtable’s dream of a union-free environment had come true. Thanks to President Ronald Reagan and his supporters in Congress, prevailing wage and occupational health and safety laws that had kept labor standards high for years were now under attack. New appointees to the National Labor Relations Board promised a “pro-management majority” for years to come. Worst of all, the President’s 1981 decision to permanently replace 12,000 striking air-traffic controllers not only paralyzed labor’s economic muscle but radically altered industrial and political relations. “The union-busters are in hog heaven now,” said one labor leader.

As manufacturing plants moved south or west or even out of the country to avoid union contracts, and as nonunion construction firms gained ground steadily, even highly skilled union mechanics wondered whether their best days were behind them. They had good reason to worry. Union-busting “labor-management” consultants were doing a booming business in the 1980s; Right-to-Work campaigns were going strong;

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and the open-shop trend in construction continued to grow. In fact, by the time the economy recovered in the mid-1980s, 20 out of the nation's top 25 construction firms—including longtime union firms—were double breasted and their nonunion subsidiaries were doing the work in areas like the Southwest and Gulf Coast where, as it happened, new construction was booming.

With the postwar trend of bargaining strength and steadily rising wages behind them, the building trades were forced to face some unsettling facts: If nonunion contractors could successfully run their jobs without union help, how long could union wages, work rules, apprenticeship ratios, and strict jurisdictional lines be defended?

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The success of nonunion competition challenged the building trades at their very core: The militant strike strategy that had empowered local unions from the start had run its course. Soaring wage rates and bad publicity were not the major problems: Having abandoned less well-paying residential and commercial work, these unions had unwittingly provided work and training opportunities to lesser skilled workers now ready and eager to replace them on major industrial projects.

If construction unions intended to survive, let alone thrive, they would have to drop their “country club” ways and try and organize nonunion workers. In other words, they would have to eliminate barriers like high initiation fees, restrictive membership policies, and referral systems that benefitted long time members over new recruits.

Although organizing the unorganized had been labor's creed from the start, it was a “foreign subject” for the trades, one that was usually mentioned at international union conventions and then forgotten by local unions until it was mentioned again at the next convention. “It

was a depressing situation,” an IBEW organizer admitted, one his union was determined to change: In 1987 the Electrical Workers launched an organizing program for construction locals and in 1988 the international union made it mandatory for local unions to establish organizing goals and committees. When the general president told business managers to do whatever it took to bring nonunion electricians into the IBEW they “thought I was . . . off my rocker,” he admitted.

To move from theory to practice, a group of IBEW organizers and labor educators from Cornell University developed COMET—Construction Organizing Membership Education Training—a program launched in 1990 to answer the question “Why organize?” In three- to four-hour classes delivered by trained instructors, rank-and-file members explored the connections that linked organizing unrepresented electricians, regaining market share, and rebuilding bargaining strength. The point was to get members to embrace organizing not only because it served their economic interests, but more important, because it was the right thing to do—all workers should have a voice on the job, safe working conditions, and fair contracts.

The task wasn't easy, even for instructors enrolled in “Train the Trainer” courses. Some took it for granted that organizing would only lengthen the out-of-work list or undermine conditions on the job. Others dismissed nonunion workers as unskilled, unqualified, “scabs” and “rats” who would have “no commitment or loyalty to the union.” All of these issues were addressed straightforwardly and over the course of some very lively discussion, participants came to realize that there were only two choices when it came to competing with nonunion workers: A union could cut wage rates in a “race to the bottom,” or it could raise the standards of nonunion workers and level the playing field.

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It did not take long for COMET to take off.

The Carpenters adopted the program early on, customizing it to suit their trade needs. And after that word began to spread. COMET-trained electricians and carpenters would talk up the program on the job site, and iron workers and sheet metal workers would say to their business managers “Why don’t we have this program?” Before too long they did, and so did the Painters, Asbestos Workers, Plumbers, and Roofers, each affiliate making its own innovations along the way. By that time an additional program, COMET II, was teaching members how to organize, from developing a comprehensive strategy, to using union “salts” on nonunion job sites, to building up trust with nonunion workers, and by 1994, multi-craft COMET programs, sponsored by the Building and Construction Trades Department, were flourishing all over the country. Ultimately the COMET program did as much to unionize the already organized as it did to broaden building trades’ ranks.

When the Building and Construction Trades Department launched a multi-craft market-wide organizing campaign in Las Vegas in 1997, known as BTOP, hopes ran high. Some sixty full-time organizers were visiting residential and light commercial job sites, dropping off leaflets (in English and Spanish), doing house calls, and hosting weekly get-togethers so that

workers could meet with union representatives from fifteen trades.

Union efforts on behalf of nonunion workers brought results: By the time the campaign ended in 1999, some 300 new contractors and subcontractors had signed collective-bargaining agreements; local unions had signed up around 7,000 new members – a 35 percent increase –and expanded their apprenticeship programs and their organizing budgets; and construction unions strengthened their power at the bargaining table and the ballot box.

No one was claiming an all-out victory, but there was still good reason to believe that “country club” unionism was on the decline: In January 2000 the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics announced the largest increase in construction union membership in decades – 131,000 workers had signed union cards the previous year, bringing union density up to 19.1 percent. Minority caucuses and groups like Women in the Trades were beginning to get more than lip services from union “brothers.” In fact, between 1985 and 2007 the number of female construction workers grew substantially and while progress came slowly, by 2010 some 39,000 women worked as unskilled laborers and helpers and almost 147,000 women were employed as carpenters, electricians, drywall installers, HVAC mechanics, and plumbers.

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Building Trades Leader Interview:

Alise Martiny

Alise Martiny is the Business Manager of the Greater Kansas City Building and Construction Trades Council.

Getting into Construction

After I graduated from the high school, I went to Kansas University and I didn't do too well. When I came home around the holidays I heard a radio ad to get more minorities and females in the construction industry. This was in 1980 and President Carter was very big on affirmative action. I applied for a pre-apprenticeship program through CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] and went through a pre-apprenticeship for concrete and cement masonry and graduated from them.

Now the one thing with me is -- my whole family has worked for generations in concrete. My father was a 45-year card member of the cement masons. When I told my father, I had applied for the program, my dad called the apprenticeship coordinator and told him that he was not babysitting me and he told them not to take me into the program.

My dad was one of those guys that believed that if it was easy, we'd have women or kids doing it. I said to him, "What makes you think I want to work for you anyway?" and he said, "I'll be damned if you will work for anyone else." I got accepted into the program and went to work for my dad. He actually owned a company and I served my apprenticeship with my dad.

It's the best thing that's ever happened because I learned a very strong work ethic -- he really taught me how to be a good mechanic and he taught me a strong work ethic. Unfortunately, when you're an apprentice working under your dad, you'll always be an apprentice until you leave.

I turned out as a journeyman and worked for another company, after a few years my dad said, "You know, I want you back."

Woman Working in Construction

I faced quite a bit of harassment in those days. My dad ran the company but he wasn't on the jobsite. I faced it more when I left him. Some of it still goes on today. The harassment that women in the construction industry have gone through -- there were ladies who got in even before me, in 1975 and 1976, the tribal elders, they had it even tougher. It's devastating when people confront you to your face. I think you get strong enough and if you have the right mentors around you, you confront it. When you go into the job site honey bucket or whatever the bathrooms are called in your area, and you see your name written over a

horrible cartoon it's devastating. There's still harassment, but when you're involved in a union you have a grievance procedure and a lot more support.

I was sometimes the only woman on the job site. So, when there's another woman, you want to help, you want to be a team, so you say "Hi, how are you?" But if two females are caught talking on the job site for more than two or three minutes, you hear, "Hey get to work!" But if two guys were talking... There was the attitude in the 1980s that it was bad luck to have more than one woman on the job site and it was just crazy. But it's really changed now.

Joining the Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons

I got active in the union because I had a mentor and he was just a great guy that I worked a lot with. He said "Hey, you ought to go to the union meeting," and "I'll pick you up." So, I started riding with him to union meetings.

Now, I'll never forget, I was at a union meeting and I had just graduated. The business manager asked if I would stay over after the meeting and asked if I would be interested in serving on the Health and Welfare trust. He goes, "Yeah. I think you'd be really good." So, I've been on our trust fund for around 33 years.

In 1993, I'll never forget, I was finishing up a set of stairs and the business manager came out and asked if I had a minute and I'm like, "Sure." And he said, "We've got a position coming up for the apprenticeship coordinator at our training center. Would you be interested?" As women -- we're the best at supporting each other but we're the worst at taking care of ourselves, so I say, "Well I don't think I've got the experience to do that." But I applied and I actually got three votes from the management trustees and one trustee on the union side voted for me. So that's how I got the position. It was unusual to have a woman coordinator, everywhere you go, you've got to prove yourself.

A few years later I became a business rep, which was great. Unfortunately, I did not have the same goals as the leadership then, I left around 2003 or 2004. I went back out with my tools which is best thing about being in a union, and a qualified crafts-person, you can always go back out with your tools. I got to work on some great projects. Then the head of the Associated General Contractors (AGC) contacted me and said, "Would you like to come to work for the AGC? I'll create a position for you." In 2004, they created a workforce development position. Basically, I was recruiting individuals for the construction industry, working with all the different crafts in recruitment and doing a lot of career fairs. It was more of an outreach program.

In 2012, several Business Managers in the Building and Trades Council here in Kansas City approached me and asked me to run for office. At the time, the local movement was fractured. I decided to run for the position. I spent a lot of time meeting with business managers telling them why I was the best for the job, why I was running. At the time of the vote, I thought I had about 30 votes; the final tally was 42 to 4.

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I've worked with these guys my whole life, they all know I've got a strong work ethic. And, believe it or not, from working on both sides, the labor side and the management sides as a recruiter, a lot of the guys knew me. This is the first position I ever got that I didn't have to prove myself all over again.

Recruiting Women in Construction

I'm always trying to get women into the industry. I've been part of the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) since the '90s. At the time, it was more for the girls in the office. But then as the coordinator in 1993, I got involved with a camp that mentors girls in construction, now called "CAMP NAWIC," which is a blast. It's about teaching high school girls about the construction industry. We make sure there is a woman teaching every project. It's all hands-on learning. The girls learn all different aspects of several trades which include carpentry one day; pipe fitting one morning; and then we're doing plumbing and electrical in the afternoon. They do a joint project where they actually wire a lamp. The last day we tour a job site tour. We cap enrollment at 24; we rotate them in groups of eight so the girls actually get to learn. It really does open their eyes to the construction industry. This is our seventh year of the camp and it's just a ton of fun.

One of the other things that we've done is the Women Build Nations Conference. That started out in Sacramento. My first year as business manager, I got to be one of the keynote speakers which was awesome. Three years ago, when the conference was in Chicago, I couldn't believe all the Kansas City gals who attend. We came back and created a tradeswoman group here called Heartland Women in Trades, HWIT, and that has made it so easy to recruit the tradeswomen for the Camp. We ended up having women help this year.

Advice for Apprenticeship Candidates

We're really trying to change the stereotype; you have to. We are getting ready for the biggest labor shortage. There's so much work. And our work force is not going to look like the work force of ten years ago. Right now, our work force looks just like it did when I got in. Our job sites need to look like the communities they're being built in. And that is through minorities and females. We have got to do a good job in recruitment. We've got to be teaching our future and bringing them into the fold. We also have to mentor new recruits that no matter who you are, your work ethic and how you handle yourself on a job site is all you have in life.

I'd say things have changed a hundredfold for women on the job since I started, but we have so much farther to go. The trades are really trying to recruit towards a diverse work force.

But we have so much farther to go.

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Organizers were also reaching out to new immigrant workers, a significant change that boded well for the future. Once shunned as unfair competitors, Mexican, Vietnamese, Cuban, and Russian workers were now recognized as potential union brothers and sisters – a change that reflected industry realities as much as social justice concerns:

At a time when the number of unionized construction workers was at an all-time low, the number of immigrant construction workers was rising rapidly. If nothing else, practicality demanded a shift in attitude, a change that some local unions continued to resist but others embraced – especially if they were eager to grow.



Building Trades Leader Interview:

Leonard Aguilar

Leonard Aguilar is Executive Director and Secretary/Treasurer of the Texas State Building and Construction Trades Council. A native of San Antonio, he is a member of United Association Local Union #142.

Getting into Construction

I became interested in the building trades after a friend of mine mentioned it – it was just an opportunity that presented itself to me. I then applied to the UA apprenticeship program, worked as a helper for a period of time and was fortunate enough to get into the plumbers' apprenticeship program. For me, the whole experience was unusual. I never thought I would be doing this as a career. Before the apprenticeship program, I didn't know anything about construction unions or unions in general. For me, it was all new and quite eye-opening.

As far as diversity goes, it was without a doubt pretty much one sided at that time. There was a father-son legacy aspect to the building trades, which there still is – to an extent. It's not as prevalent today as it was back then, but it's an issue that we need to address and continue to address. It is something that we need to talk about – to recruit a more diverse workforce in the trades.

In my view, how well any individual does in the trades is really up to that individual – it's all about what you put into the work and the training and how you do it. By no means was I the best apprentice out there, or the best pre-apprentice. It also depended on who you were working in the training center and who you were working around on the job. There were a lot of individuals that were very helpful to me – and some that weren't. But the majority of the people I worked with, I have to say, were more than helpful. They were mentors to me.

As my training and work experience went on, every day was a learning experience. As far as my experience with the union, it was something that I took a

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liking to. As I've gone through the years and progressed in my career from being a pre-apprentice to being an apprentice and then becoming a journeyman – and then being an instructor for the state plumbing license for our local apprenticeship and finally working for the international union as an organizer in bringing in new members and contractors – my goals were to learn and grow and to take on more responsibility.

Joining the United Association

Without a doubt, the United Association has made a pretty big difference in my career and my life. My family and I would not be where we are without it. We're able to live comfortably and our minds are somewhat at ease. For me personally, it's knowing that I have the security of medical and retirement benefits, which means that at the end of my career I'll be taken care of when I'm not able to work anymore. I didn't think about things like benefits when I was younger.

Recruiting a Diverse Construction Workforce

Here in Texas, Hispanics make up the majority of the construction work force. It's a given. That's just the demographic makeup of this area. So, recruiting Hispanic workers isn't any extra work. But we always make an effort in our organization to respond to negative stereotypes. Treating people decently and treating people with respect shouldn't be an issue for anyone in the work force and it shouldn't be a worry for men or women. We shouldn't be insulting anybody; we should be respectful of all workers just as a common day-to-day thing. It's not a union, non-union issue. It's important to treat people with respect. Simply put, we need to be better than that and that's what we're trying to do in the Texas Building Trades Council.

In trying to ensure a diverse work force across Texas, we do a lot of outreach. To cite one example, we've recently committed a lot of time and resources toward building apprentice readiness programs across the state. That's the main goal of Texas Building Trades office right now – to expand the work that some of our locals have done over the past couple of years – to get this conversation started about apprenticeship readiness programs. ARPs, as we call them, allow us to recruit new apprenticeship candidates from those communities that we typically haven't reached in the past, including women, veterans and communities of color. These programs are opening doors for us.

One of the biggest changes that I've seen since I started out has to be the opportu-

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nity I've had to move into a leadership position in the Texas Building Trades. For me personally, to be in this position – as head of the Texas State Building Trades – is a big change. From what I've been told, I believe I'm the first Hispanic in the country to lead a statewide building trades organization. Based on what I know about the construction industry, that seems odd to me. It seems like it should have happened a while ago. But seeing that people are more accepting of diversity in the trades is a sign of good progress. Today people accept that. We may have been slow in opening doors for more diverse leaders in construction, so my goal is to be more welcoming for the next generation.

Advice for Apprenticeship Candidates

I think now more than ever, we as union leaders, as Building Trades union leaders, have an opportunity to change the way that people think about a more diverse workforce – in other words to address any stereotypes that unfortunately are still out there. One way to accomplish this is to recruit in neighborhoods that we haven't typically targeted in the past. Today, we have an opportunity to show respect and thanks to veterans, for instance, and to bring them in and provide them the opportunity for a career in the trades. There's plenty of work opportunities today in the industry, so we have to be smart enough to leverage these opportunities and be welcoming to groups that we haven't served in the past.

As far as apprentice candidates go, my message to them is that they shouldn't get discouraged. They might have an idea of what they want to do in construction, whatever craft they choose, but the path to success isn't necessarily going to be a straight one. Ultimately, if they keep working, take care of their business, show up to work every day, show up ready to work and do a solid day's work – it's going to be to their benefit. And then, as they become a journey level worker, as they work through their careers, they should never forget to turn around and help the next person seeking the same opportunities they had.

My success in the Texas Building Trades is due to the combination of hard work and support. Support that was from friends, co-workers, but my family the most. We're called journeymen and journeywomen for a reason. Because we are away from home a lot, and our "journeys" would not have gotten us where we are today without the help and support. I can say for myself that combination was what helped me. That's why we need to provide similar support to the next generation of Texas construction workers and leaders.

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This shift in attitude was crucial, but it was only the first step in a complicated process. Because there was no one-size-fits-all strategy for a successful organizing campaign, organizers not only had to know their rights within the law, they had to be ready to adapt their strategies and tactics to suit a dynamic market. Social, political, and economic research became an essential starting point. Tech-savvy organizers scoured the Internet to chart a company owner's corporate ties, behaviors, and customers to identify areas where that company might be vulnerable to public pressure. They analyzed the local and regional market to identify promising targets. They visited nonunion workers on the job and at home – and more recently via social media – to learn how they were treated at work and what their families needed most.

“Every campaign is different,” one organizer explained. “You have to find the tools that really work, because not every tool works, that worked before.” Some situations called for NLRB elections; some for informational campaigns or “shame banners” to publicize hazardous conditions or the use of inferior

materials. Sometimes filing a series of unfair labor practice charges got negotiations started. Other times, just letting nonunion workers know what they were missing – overtime pay, prevailing wage rates, even water on the job – was enough to launch a campaign.

The revitalization of organizing campaigns and strategies came at the right time, because around the turn of the 21st century major construction users began to question the value of open-shop construction. Dissatisfied with the quality of the work, they now wondered if the well-funded plans of the building trades opponents had gone too far. Complex projects like petrochemical plants, refineries, or nuclear power plants, for instance, required a reliable supply of highly skilled workers to carry out construction plans. Like it or not, union workers had the training and skills to work more productively than nonunion competition, and union foremen and supervisors knew how to get a job done on time and on budget.

But that training and ability was not enough, as far as construction users were concerned.



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They were willing to pay a premium for union construction, but walk-offs, jurisdictional squabbles, poor performers, or attendance problems could all cancel the deal, a threat that union leaders and contractors took seriously. Determined to keep up their end of the bargain, local and national unions developed “Codes of Excellence” that generally promoted the traditional “8 for 8” rule: There would be no work slowdowns, extra breaks, or early quitting times; no drugs or alcohol use, vandalism, or unprofessional behavior; no incompetent workers, poorly maintained tools, or unsafe work practices. “Value on Display – Every day,” became the building trades motto.

At the time, the codes were controversial, at least as far as under-performers were concerned. But as one international union president put it, there was nothing radical about the code unless “you think that progress, accountability, and excellence are radical steps.”

Today Building Trades leaders try to spread the word that “We are not our grandfathers’ building trades unions.” For the most part, they are right. Fifty years ago, no one would have predicted that an African American might lead a building trades union or that women might serve as business managers or Council leaders. At that time, social media was not on the horizon; now it serves as a major means of communication and outreach. At that time, local unions tended to fend for themselves; now many seek alliances with social justice, civil rights, and environmental partners, fighting for issues like equal pay for equal work, employment and training opportunities for under-represented communities, national health care, the right to organize, issues that affect all wage-earners, union members or not.

To a large extent, the decline of union density in the construction industry over the last 50 years forced construction unions to reassess their goals and strategies. And the job is not finished

yet. If the trades intend to thrive in an increasingly competitive marketplace, productivity, professionalism, and a commitment to fairness will strengthen their position, along with top-down and bottom-up organizing, political action, and strong community ties. And if they hope to reorganize lower-waged markets that they abandoned long ago, they will have to resolve a problem that dates back to the rise of skyscrapers and prefabricated materials: Where do semi-skilled workers already employed in the industry fit into union classifications?

With union density in the private sector at around 14 percent in the U.S., collective-bargaining rights frequently under attack, and a globalized, deregulated “winner take all” economic system, the future is hardly secure. Yet there is nothing particularly new about that: From the earliest efforts to organize unions and councils, the building trades have had to overcome political and economic obstacles, internal dissent, and a public image unfairly shaped by opponents. They have had to adapt to rapidly changing technologies and an increasingly diversified work force. In the process they have experimented with a range of strategies: from militant strikes to joint labor-management agreements, from political lobbying to grass-roots political action, and from exclusive “country club” unionism to a commitment to do whatever it takes to organize the unorganized.

What is new, in the 21st century, is the building trades’ willingness to admit and confront past failings in an effort to move their unions and their industry forward. Building trades unions may have lost the dominance they once enjoyed in construction work, but their members have not lost the skill or vitality that made them a real force in the industry and the labor movement. The battle for fair wages, safe conditions, and middle-class living standards is far from over, but victory will depend on the future, not the past.

Back to the Future



This essay is based on my books, *Skilled Hands, Strong Spirits: A Century of Building Trades History* (Cornell University, 2005); *Dreams of Dignity, Workers of Vision: A History of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers* (IBEW, 2016: 2nd Edition); "Honor the Past, Fight for the Future: A History of the Sheet Metal Workers' International Association, 1888-2012," (The Members Journal, chapters published throughout 2013); and case studies I produced for "The Campaign Guide: Organizing and Contract Enforcement in the Construction Industry," (BCTD, 2014).

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