

# Worker's Heritage in the Building Trades

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## From Artisans to Wage-earners

**When it comes to construction work, some things never change: From pyramids in ancient times to today's towering skyscrapers, the work has always been hard, dangerous, seasonal, and significant.**

**Yet for all this continuity, change has been constant, too. In an industry shaped by boom and bust business cycles, when employment goes up and down, the building trades have had to adapt to changing technologies, skill requirements, market conditions, and social and cultural values. Their organizations have evolved from craft-based protective societies, to local unions and building trades councils, to international unions and today's North America's Building Trades Unions. In the process, building trades workers and their organizations have become the leading protectors of apprenticeship training, health and safety provisions on the job, collective bargaining rights, and prevailing wage laws.**

**The process has never been easy, especially given the trades' different market strengths and weaknesses, an abiding tradition of craft autonomy, and a very practical need to keep their members employed, even if that meant one union fighting another over work jurisdiction. And it isn't over yet: In the construction industry, a worker's right to fair wages, safe working conditions, and a voice on the job is still contested every day.**

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### **Section 1: From Artisans to Wage-earners to Local and National Unions**

Craft worker pride and faith in democracy went hand in hand in the first few decades of American history. "Labour and Skill are indispensable for the advancement of civilization," boasted a group of construction workers, because, as a group of shipwrights put it, "By Commerce We Live." Like generations of workers before them, who both promoted and protected their skill and their livelihoods by organizing craft guilds as far back as the Middle Ages, these early American artisans took it for granted that they were not "mere mechanics" but vital citizens and contributors to American social, political, and economic life.

Independence and equality defined the artisan system that shaped the early Republic. Master craftsmen, journeymen, and apprentice craftsmen had developed what seemed to be a mutually beneficial arrangement. (In those days,

"men" fairly described the work force.) Masters, who owned the tools and the shop, did everything from waiting on customers, to ordering materials, to working alongside employees to get orders out. In the process they trained young apprentices, usually teenage boys who often lived in their households. After acquiring a full set of skills, which could take as long as seven years, apprentices reached journey status. Now entitled to earn a wage, they were paid by the hour or by the piece (the number of items they produced or tasks they completed), depending on their trade. Under the right conditions, they would work hard, save up enough to open their own shops, and serve as masters to the next generation of craftsmen. Although moving up the ranks was not guaranteed, a skilled mechanic who was willing to work hard could expect to earn a decent standard of living with savings enough for retirement.

As early as the 1830s, though, the artisan system and the independence and social rank that went with it, was on the way out. Internal

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improvements, from highways, to canal systems, to railroads, fueled a shift away from the artisan's local market, to the capitalist's regional and eventually national markets. Hand-tools gave way to water-powered factories where skilled work was sub-divided and performed by "hands" who worked longer days for lower wages. The rapid growth of cities also changed the artisan's way of life, for as the economy expanded, so did the demand for skilled workers in urban centers. At the same time, growing numbers of immigrant workers, skilled and unskilled, were now competing for work.

The rise of the factory, the expansion of the market, and the shift in journeyworkers' status from artisan to wage-earner, all but severed the ties between master and journeyman, and craft work and independence. Yet some trades fared better than others. For instance, while the factory system and labor-saving technology took a serious toll on crafts like shoe-making, hat-making, and garment-making, hand-tools and craft skills were still essential in construction work. To be sure, there were factories producing windows, doors, and other building parts, but as late as the 1880s, carpenters still carved ornate moldings, or fashioned beams, pillars, and other heavy work. Stone cutters used chisels and hammers and worked on site. Plastering had barely changed since colonial days, and painters, bricklayers, roofers, and tile setters, all worked by hand.

Because the industry still served a local market, construction mechanics and the small, unincorporated contractors who employed them, shared the same social roots: Both tended to be immigrants who started out as apprentices, and both moved from job to job, scrambling for steady income. Success was hardly guaranteed. Because contracts were short and profits were low in this highly competitive, seasonal industry, unexpected



changes – rising prices, economic depression, even a spell of bad weather – could bankrupt marginal contractors.

And in the busiest cities, like New York, Chicago, Cleveland, and St. Louis, where business was booming employers rarely shared the wealth. Expected to work 10-hour days and 6-day weeks for wages that barely kept a family afloat, the most skilled workers began to put down their tools and organize local unions. These union pioneers intended to be more than industrial "hands." They expected to be recognized as valuable industrial partners who deserved decent wages, safe conditions, and a voice on the job site.

They weren't alone. Ever since the 1840s more and more wage-earners had banded together to improve their situations. Some favored joining labor reform groups, like the Knights of Labor, which welcomed skilled and unskilled workers with the motto, "an injury to one is the concern of all." Others were socialists who believed that political power was the key to social justice, or anarchists willing to do whatever it took to undermine an unfair labor system. For the most part, though, skilled mechanics in the building trades tended

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to favor craft - or trade - unions that focused on gaining practical goals, like higher wages and shorter hours, and trade agreements to achieve decent wages and working conditions.

The Bricklayers, for example, who had organized a national union as early as 1865, relied on their skill and discipline to keep standards high – because local unions admitted only the most productive and skilled workers, the union was vital to a contractor's success; and because union members paid relatively high dues, they knew they could afford to strike, if necessary. This strategy paid off: The first of the building trades to establish the closed union shop, collective bargaining, and the 9-hour day (which would soon be the 8-hour day in Chicago), the Bricklayers were also the first to employ business agents, or walking delegates, to ensure that union men only worked on a job and that contractors honored their agreements.

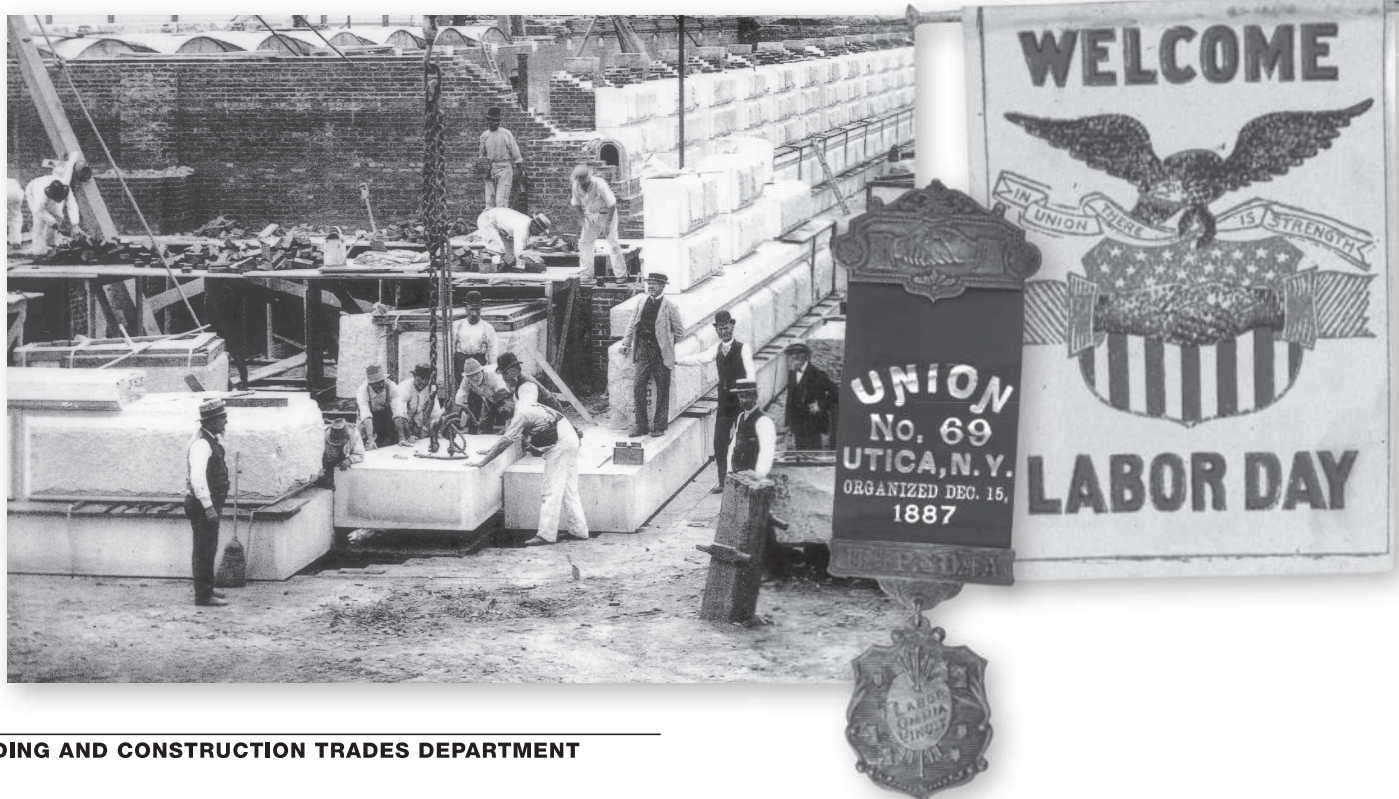
Before too long other trades were not only following the Bricklayers' example; they were taking it a step farther: In the busiest cities,

business agents pooled their strength by organizing citywide building trades councils (BTCs). Local BTCs seemed especially threatening to employers, and not only because their leaders were demonized as criminals by the press: Because member unions pledged to support each other's strikes, the BTC had the economic muscle it took to enforce union wages and working conditions on each and every job site.

Without a doubt, walking delegates had to be tough and aggressive to succeed, but the BTC's power actually rested on the union worker's skill. With the rise of steel frame skyscrapers in the 1880s and '90s, and subsequent (and expensive) innovations like high speed elevators, electric motors, and steam heating systems, the quality of the work mattered.

Brick walls encasing steel structures had to be water tight; pipefitters had to have practical knowledge of hydraulics and pneumatics. Elevators had to be dependable and safe. And electrical work had to be expertly done to prevent fire hazards, a high standard to meet in the 1890s when electrical wiring was just

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taking off. Because time was money as far as contractors were concerned, a building trades worker had to be “first class or he is of little use.”

To make the laws of supply and demand work for journeymen, building trades unions concentrated on skill, training, and performance. They used their union journals to publish expert discussions of technical matters, and expected new members to pass technical exams, especially if they intended to work in high-wage cities. These early efforts to promote skill and control entrance to the trades gave organized mechanics the economic leverage they needed to negotiate agreements in an industry dependent on competent, productive workers.

But the industry and the trades were hardly static. As steel replaced wood and stone as primary building materials, and steel erectors began to dominate commercial construction in the 1890s, regional and even national contracting companies were entering the business. And as skyscrapers (and expenses) continued to rise, general contractors began to introduce new building materials and methods of installation that often crossed traditional trade

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lines. When contractors introduced reinforced concrete as a cheaper alternative to brick and stone work, for instance, bricklayers, plasterers and a new “specialty” union of cement finishers all claimed the work while iron workers, lathers, sheet metal workers, and laborers fought over the right to install metal reinforcing rods. These jurisdictional conflicts grew into jurisdictional wars that building trades councils and sympathy strikes could not resolve: Generally, when a local building trades council rendered a decision that went against a well-organized union like the Carpenters, that union usually left the council, opening the door for still other conflicts and strikes.

Determined to find a permanent solution to these ongoing fights among the crafts, a group of local and national building trades leaders founded the National Building Trades Council in 1897. However, the organization did not last: Jurisdictional fights and the strikes that went with them continued to disrupt the industry. In fact, these contests grew so intense that in 1903 strikes or lockouts shut down construction in nearly every organized city, seriously damaging the reputation of building trades councils.

Well aware that it was past time to resolve these disputes, representatives of the six largest unions – Bricklayers, Carpenters, Painters, Iron Workers, Laborers, and Plumbers established the Structural Building Trades Alliance in 1903. Their idea was to admit only the “primary” trades and force the newer “specialties” like the Lathers to join the Plasterers, and the Steam Fitters to join the Plumbers. But that was easier said than done, and in the meantime jurisdictional strikes continued to disrupt the industry.

In 1908 a more permanent organization took hold: Delegates from 18 trades, both primary and specialty, organized the Building Trades Department (which later changed its name

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to the Building and Construction Trades Department and finally today's North America's Building Trades Unions) and affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. Problems still festered and member unions still tended to secede when decisions did not go their way. But by 1916, things were looking up: "For the first time in the history of the Building Trades movement . . . we are all united," the first Building Trades president proclaimed.

And just in time: World War I had been raging in Europe since 1914, and by the close of 1916 American involvement seemed imminent. In March 1917, just a few weeks before the United States officially joined the fight, AFL president Samuel Gompers met with leading trade unionists – including building trades leaders – to hammer out the AFL's "Position in Peace or in War." By "pulling in harness" with the government, as President Woodrow Wilson later put it, AFL unions would take their place as vital partners in the nation's war effort, a first in American history. For the building trades this meant working with the federal government to build military cantonments (or training camps), air fields, and other necessary structures, as quickly and professionally as possible – demonstrating, in the process, the practical value of a skilled labor force ready and able to meet a crisis.

The process wasn't easy. The government agreed to pay union wages, enforce the 8-hour day, and recognize labor's right to organize and the trades agreed not to strike or enforce closed-shop conditions – concessions that did not sit well with the best organized trades. But even without a closed-shop mandate, union membership in general government construction was higher than ever. Both the Iron Workers and the Operating Engineers added ten thousand members during the war, the Laborers sixteen thousand, the Painters almost thirty thousand, and the Carpenters and Elec-

trical Workers one hundred thousand members each.

As long as war raged on in Europe, organized labor enjoyed public respect; no domestic issue was more pressing than bringing order, fairness, and representation to the work place. But once the crisis had passed a "monopolistic" unions were blamed for postwar inflation and a sluggish economy: The building trades were targeted by a national open shop movement backed by the Chamber of Commerce, the National Erectors Association, the National Manufacturers Association, and national employers like U.S. Steel. Characterizing the open shop as the embodiment of American principles including independence and fair play, supporters insisted that closed union shops threatened economic prosperity, an idea that was catching on. The Associated Industries of Seattle, for instance, launched what they called the open-shop "American Plan" to make the city union-free, and by 1921, open-shop construction reigned in Duluth, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, St. Paul, and San Francisco, disrupting the industry – and Building Trades Councils – in the process.

The postwar reaction to organized labor illustrated the "two steps forward, one step back" rhythm of U.S. labor history: The wage-earners' world had changed by leaps and bounds since the disruption of the artisan system in the 1830s and building trades workers had played a vital role. They erected the skyscrapers that changed city skylines and stimulated economic growth; they helped develop new industries like electrical work and elevator construction; they answered the nation's call in wartime, building whatever the government needed to wage a successful fight; and they built strong organizations dedicated to promoting workers' rights and improving living standards. What they had not yet successfully built, however, was the

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solidarity among and between trades that they would need to move forward, an issue that would become increasingly important after the economy collapsed in 1929.

## Section 2: Government Matters

Expansion and contraction, boom and bust, work opportunities and unemployment – the business cycle had long set the pace for construction workers and their families. But even the most experienced workers and careful budgeters were not prepared for the financial crisis that roiled the industry – and the nation – in the 1930s. The stock market had crashed in 1929, ushering in the Great Depression. Between 1929 and 1933, corporate profits fell from \$10 billion to \$1 billion, the gross national product was cut in half, and 25 percent of the work force was unemployed.

As the national economy ground to a halt, the construction industry went with it. Private construction expenditures fell almost 80 percent between 1929 and 1933 (from about \$11 billion to \$3 billion) and public expenditures dropped 40 percent between 1931 and 1933. By that time, seven out of ten building tradesmen were out of work and the rest saw hours drop, av-

erage wages fall (by 15 percent), and annual earnings cut in half. Early efforts to protect trade standards, like the 1931 Davis-Bacon Act (which required workers employed on government building projects to be paid at rates prevailing locally) made little difference at the time.

The election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 and his inaugural promise “to put people to work” raised working-class spirits. Under his New Deal administration, Roosevelt encouraged collective bargaining and union standards in private industry as a means of promoting economic recovery, since higher wage rates meant higher consumption. The 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act, for instance, and its “fair codes of competition” for wages, prices, and hours, recognized labor’s right to organize and bargain collectively through unions. Struck down in 1935 as unconstitutional, it was replaced by the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the Wagner Act, which protected labor’s right to organize and established a National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to enforce “cease and desist” orders against unfair employers. The idea that unions were vital to economic recovery, and not the source of all problems (as open-shop-



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pers had argued for years), was indeed a new deal for American workers. As organizers put it, “The President Wants You to Join a Union.”

But what kind of union? Would President Roosevelt support skilled building trades unions, with high wage rates, established jurisdictions, and closed-shop conditions? Or was he mainly interested in promoting new industrial unions that were springing up every day in mass-production industries like steel, auto making, and electrical manufacturing (and which would soon establish a new federation, the Congress of Industrial Organizations)? When conflicts developed, as they inevitably would, who would decide what constituted “fair” conditions and how work would be assigned? Experienced trade unionists with a history of setting their own standards, or political appointees who had their own ideas about labor organization and industrial democracy? And finally, when it came to public works projects, was the federal government an employer like any other,

duty-bound to honor union contracts and prevailing rates and conditions? Or did it have a moral obligation to spread relief funds as far as they would go to help those workers least able to help themselves?

These questions reflected some remarkable shifts in government-labor relations that were still taking shape in the mid-1930s. New Deal efforts to increase government spending as a way to reemploy the nation’s work force made government a prime factor in economic affairs. For instance, between 1933 and 1939 the Public Works Administration employed some 300,000 building tradesmen a month on large-scale projects like New York’s Triborough Bridge and Lincoln Tunnel, Oregon’s Coastal Highway, Philadelphia’s 30th Street Station, the Southwest’s Boulder Dam, and the wide-ranging Tennessee Valley Authority, among many others. To avoid conflicts on the job, three building trades leaders represented the workers’ interests on the PWA Labor Advisory Board.



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There was no getting around the fact that government – and politics – mattered. Lobbying, testifying at congressional hearings, and keeping local, state, and federal officials supplied with facts and figures to document union standards became full-time jobs “Our objective,” as Bricklayer Harry Bates put it, “was to obtain as much Federal funds going into construction” as possible.

The question of apprenticeship training and standards likewise required attention after the apprenticeship system in construction almost collapsed during the early 1930s: In 1937 the National Apprenticeship Act, also known as the Fitzgerald Act, became law, empowering the Secretary of Labor to appoint a national advisory committee to research and draft regulations establishing minimum standards for apprenticeship programs. The committee,

which brought together representatives of employers, labor, and the public, had two immediate aims. First, it would protect the welfare of young trainees, second, it would assure the nation of an adequate supply of skilled labor going forward.

Considering the long years of unemployment and distress that had preceded the Fitzgerald Act, some might have questioned the need to expand the skilled labor pool. But conditions were rapidly changing. In the fall of 1939 another world war was erupting in Europe. By mid-September Canada had entered the fray, and the United States was getting ready to launch a national defense campaign that had been in the works since 1936 – a campaign that depended on a skilled work force. By July 1940 Congress had appropriated more than \$300,000,000 to construct military housing and training facilities, transport

**THE NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP ACT  
(50 Stat. 664; 29 U.S.C. 50)**

To enable the [U.S.] Department of Labor to formulate and promote the furtherance of labor standards necessary to safeguard the welfare of apprentices and to cooperate with the States in the promotion of such standards.

Be it enacted by the senate and House of representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the Secretary of Labor is hereby authorized and directed to formulate and promote the furtherance of labor standards necessary to safeguard the welfare of apprentices, to extend the application of such standards by encouraging the inclusion thereof in contracts of apprenticeship, to bring together employers and labor for the formulation of programs of apprenticeship, to cooperate with State agencies engaged in the formulation and promotion of standards of apprenticeship, and to cooperate with the National Youth Administration and with the Office of Education of the Department of the Interior in accordance with the section 6 of the Act of February 23, 1917 (29 Stat. 932), as amended by the Executive Order Numbered 6166, June 10, 1933, issued pursuant to an Act of June 30, 1932 (47 Stat. 414) as amended.

**SEC. 2.** The Secretary of Labor may publish information relating to existing and proposed labor standards of apprenticeship, and may appoint national advisory committees to serve without compensation. Such committees shall include representatives of employers, representatives of labor, educators, and officers of other executive departments, with the consent of the head of any such department.

**SEC. 3.** On and after the effective date of this Act the National Youth Administration shall be relieved of direct responsibility for the promotion of labor standards of apprenticeship as heretofore conducted through the division of apprentice training and shall transfer all records and papers relating to such activities to the custody of the Department of Labor. The Secretary of Labor is authorized to appoint such employees as he may from time to time find necessary for the administration of this Act, with regard to existing laws applicable to the appointment and compensation of employees of the United States: Provided, however, That he may appoint persons now employed in division of apprentice training of the National Youth Administration upon certification by the Civil Service Commission of their qualifications after nonassembled examinations.

**SEC. 4.** This Act shall take effect on July 1, 1937, or as soon thereafter as it shall be approved.

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roads, airports, munitions factories, and even recreation centers – war defense projects that would employ 1.3 million workers in 1940. Within a year total construction employment would reach an all-time high of 2.9 million and by 1942, the value of new construction would peak at \$13.4 billion.

To avoid strikes and insure that the work ran smoothly, President Roosevelt appointed the CIO's Sidney Hillman to represent organized labor on the Advisory Committee of the Council of National Defense (CND). Joining Hillman in government service were Joseph Keenan, of the Chicago Federation of Labor (and a long-time member of IBEW), as Hillman's assistant, and the IBEW's Daniel Tracy, as assistant Secretary of Labor. By September 1940 the CND had adopted a labor policy that recognized the 40-hour week and the principle of overtime payment and unofficially recognized the Building and Construction Trades Department as having exclusive jurisdiction over building and construction work.

Ultimately, it would take the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the United States' entry into the Second World War to unite the building trades into the nation's first arm of defense. Just days after the attack, building trades union members were enlisting in the armed forces and signing up for shipyard jobs in the Pacific war zone. By January 1942, they were also joining the "Seabees," the newly authorized Naval Construction Battalions whose motto was "Construimus, Batuimus" or "We Build, We Fight." Drawn from the same union mechanics who had erected Boulder Dam, the Golden Gate Bridge, and the nation's skyscrapers, Seabees constructed over 400 military bases in the Atlantic and Pacific theaters, cleared and paved thousands of miles of airstrips and roadways, constructed warehouses, hospitals, gasoline storage tanks and housing, and repaired ships in harbor as well as at sea. In the Pacific, where they had the biggest

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job to do, the Seabees landed right after the Marines. When the Japanese attacked Guam, Midway Island, and Wake Island, in 1942, these construction workers put down their tools, took up rifles, and joined the fight.

The story was less dramatic but equally significant at home. The federal government had authorized \$26 billion worth of urgent military projects, war housing, and community and war industry facilities, and the building trades were getting the job done. Asbestos workers and boiler makers were rebuilding the Navy's decimated fleet at Pearl Harbor, and operating engineers were pushing through almost 2,000 miles of unmapped wilderness, between British Columbia and Alaska, to construct the Alcan Highway.

At the same time, thousands of building mechanics were doing secret, hazardous work at Los Alamos, New Mexico, Hanford, Washington, and Oak Ridge, Tennessee, erecting the pilot plants, laboratories, and manufacturing facilities that supported the Manhattan Project, the research and production effort that would develop atomic weapons. As one government official put it, "The world knows today that production of the atomic bomb was a race . . . we might have lost . . . if America's labor unions . . . had not pitched in wholeheartedly to recruit needed workers for the 'Manhattan Project.'"

Despite long hours, seven-day weeks, and constant friction with military and government agencies, nothing impeded defense work for long. Building trades unions honored their no-strike agreement, and the work went off without a major hitch, a real tribute, Joseph Keenan pointed out, to the ingenuity and organizational capacity of the building trades. As a director of the War Labor Board's Labor Production Division, a longtime leader of the Chicago Federation of Labor, and a member of the IBEW, Keenan knew what the trades were up against. "I know how many hard-won privileges were suspended in order to expedite the job," he said. "When the history of this war is written, a big chapter should be devoted to the engineers and carpenters, electricians and plumbers, iron workers, bricklayers, roofers and laborers, and all the other tradesmen who built America's war plant in record-breaking time."

When the war was over, though, relations with government changed abruptly. With unions representing a record high 35 percent of the nonagricultural workforce and militant strikes disrupting postwar business, an aggressive newspaper campaign against "big labor" generated public fears that unions had grown too powerful for the nation's good. Blaming strikers for postwar shortages and inflation, anti-union legislators struck a chord with voters.

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They not only elected a Republican majority to both houses of Congress in 1946, but they apparently wanted those congressmen to pass more laws to control labor unions, according to a Gallup poll taken around the same time. The result was disappointing but not a surprise: Reactionary politicians had been trying to gut the Wagner Act since the days of CIO sit-down strikes in the mid-1930s and building trades leaders did not expect them to stop trying now.

As long as the building trades avoided jurisdictional strikes, leaders believed, they had nothing to fear from the 80th Congress. They had not been part of the sit-down strikes and they had not been part of the 1945-46 strike waves either. But when the 80th Congress enacted the Taft-Hartley Act to amend the National Labor Relations Act in June 1947, building trades unions were hit hard. The law prohibited the closed shop and classified secondary boycotts and jurisdictional strikes as "unfair labor practices" and therefore illegal. Apparently, the coalition of anti-union Republicans and southern Democrats that passed Taft-Hartley over President Harry Truman's veto was less concerned with CIO strikes than they were with the building trades' high level of organization (up from 65 percent in 1941 to 92

percent in 1947, according to some estimates) and their militant defense of jurisdictional rights.

Ironically, the same policies that had made it possible for building trades workers to man emergency construction jobs in remote areas during World War II – closed shop contracts, union referrals, and a permit system to employ temporary help – were all illegal under the Taft-Hartley Act. And the longtime practice of negotiating agreements before a job began – almost a necessity in contract-based construction – was no longer strictly legal without an NLRB election first. But perhaps the worst blow came in 1951 when the U.S. Supreme Court issued what was known as the Denver decision which outlawed the secondary boycott, or sympathetic strike – the building trades' most effective weapon in the fight to organize construction jobs. It also curtailed a union's right to help another union organize a job, the very practice that had given rise to building trades councils in the first place.

The crushing weight of the Denver decision shocked the Department into action. Revitalizing the Building Trades Legislative Committee in 1951, the Department also agreed to hold



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annual regional conferences to keep local, state, and national leaders in touch with each other's problems. At the same time, Department leaders used the monthly Bulletin to campaign for a change in Department strategy. Launched in 1948 to keep local councils apprised of Taft-Hartley's impact, the Bulletin now issued emergency calls for political action.

It was an issue AFL secretary-treasurer George Meany had been raising for years. Back in 1947, he had made it clear that times had changed and building trades unions had to change with them. "We have to recognize the fact that we are not fighting the employer on the economic field. If we were fighting him there, there [would be] no question who could win. We are fighting him on the political field," and that required a change in tactics. If organized labor expected to amend Taft-Hartley, it would have to let the public know what unions did for their members. And it would have to let Congress know where union voters stood. "You are not going to remove the [the Taft-Hartley law] through strikes here and there," Meany reiterated. "It has to be done in the same fashion as it was put in there." The time had come to take up AFL founder Samuel Gompers' classic advice to reward labor's friends and defeat its enemies, regardless of political party, a policy that could still bring results, Meany believed, "if you give it a chance to work."

Making a significant move towards political action, the Department launched its first national Legislative Conference in 1955. Called to inform building trades workers about "deficiencies" in federal laws, especially Taft-Hartley and the Davis-Bacon Act (which no longer suited postwar conditions), the conference was designed to bring local, state, and international union representatives together to hammer out workable strategies. "We in the Building Trades do not want the Government in the labor picture,," leaders agreed. But since there

was no getting around the fact that "the Federal Government is in the construction industry and in a big way," they saw no better choice than to promote the building trades vision of fair labor standard in Congress.

It was a far cry, of course, from the access to government power that the building trades had experienced during the Second World War, when their skill proved essential to victory. In those critical days, a fellow mechanic was second in command at the Department of Labor, prevailing union wage rates set the standard for defense construction, and the basic rules of building trades unionism – the closed shop, the union hiring hall, and collectively-bargained agreements – were the key to meeting wartime production demands. Those days were gone, as the Taft-Hartley Act and the Denver decision demonstrated in no uncertain terms. But that did not mean that the fight was over.

### Section 3: The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

Taft-Hartley and the Denver decision took a toll on the building trades economic power, yet, in the 1950s, the future had never looked so bright to the men who worked with the tools – and in the 1950s, "men" was still the accurate term. Government investment in highway and defense construction was on the rise, especially after the outbreak of war in Korea in 1950, and private construction was back on its feet after a twenty-year hiatus. With residential construction at an all-time high, and a commercial building boom underway in New York City, Chicago, and other urban centers, there was more than enough work to go around: Between 1947 and 1954, expenditures for new construction increased 119 percent nationwide, and set a record high of \$47.3 billion in 1957 – 3 percent higher than the record set in 1956.

More interested in enjoying the fruits of post-

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war prosperity than they were in fighting legal battles, the building trades focused on protecting their greatest industrial asset: Their ability to do a job right, the first time. In a custom industry like building and construction, where almost every job presented new problems that had to be solved on the spot, experienced, creative, and knowledgeable mechanics played a vital role in a contractor's success. Mechanics – or journey level workers – had mastered the fundamentals of their craft and performed a wide range of specialized tasks. Supervising their own work, it was up to mechanics to lay out jobs from blueprints and then complete work efficiently so that the next trade could get started. A complex mix of brain, brawn, and competence, construction work requires skills that ranged from mathematics and drafting, to stamina and speed, to the safe operation of machinery – skills that took time to develop. Even so-called unskilled labor, like hod carriers or cement mixers, had to know what they were doing on the job – mixing “mud” in the right proportions for the plasterer or the bricklayer, and then delivering it at the right time and in the right amount so that there would be no breaks in the flow of work took practice.

Whether through formal joint apprenticeship programs (employer-funded “learn while you earn” training that incorporated established national-level skill standards) or on-the-job training, building trades unions generally controlled training for construction workers, a critical factor in this boom and bust industry. The better their training, the better able they were to find a job when work was scarce.

Yet even as construction work boomed, it was still not easy to break into the trades. Employers might complain about skill shortages but building trades workers kept a tight rein on membership. From their point of view and based on years of experience, boom times never lasted; they saw no point in bringing

in new members who would then compete with longtime members when times got tough again. With their own economic security in mind, they tended to limit apprenticeship training to family members and friends. At the time there was nothing unusual about the practice. “If your father was in the building trades, you tried to get in . . . the building trades union,” as one mechanic put it. “I have to admit that there are many unions that I couldn't get into,” another noted. But he made no apologies for what he called the “father-son” deal since it offered working-class sons a start in life.

However, what seemed like a common-sense decision to union members looked like illegal exclusion to those outside the trades. The fact that tax-payer funded public works projects were going strong in the 1950s and '60, thanks to a combination of Cold War defense projects (like missile sites and the Interstate Highway system) and domestic improvements (like water, gas, and sewage systems), complicated the issue. Ever since the 1940s, federal contracts had included a non-discrimination clause, to ensure that all Americans, whatever their race or religion, had equal access to government-funded work. And ever since the 1950s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had been urging the President's Committee on Government Contracts to enforce that clause on construction work, and especially on apprenticeship programs certified by the U.S. Department of Labor.

“These apprenticeship training programs are with very rare exception completely closed to qualified Negroes,” noted Herbert Hill, the NAACP's labor secretary. “Because union membership is a condition of employment in the building trades industry,” he explained, “the effect of trade union discrimination is to prevent Negro mechanics from working in jobs within the jurisdiction of . . . the Building Trades [Department] of the AFL-CIO.”

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### Building Trades Leader Interview:

## Kenneth E. Rigmaiden

Kenneth E. Rigmaiden was appointed Executive General Vice-President for the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) in 2002. He was unanimously elected to the office of General President by the IUPAT General Executive Board in March 2013. In 2014 he was elected by the delegates of the 31st General Convention.

### The Rigmaiden Family and the Trades

My father was a veteran of World War II, served in the Pacific Theater, came back and he worked for the railroads. However, he wanted something a little bit more and wanted to become a carpenter, and so, started pursuing the carpenters union.

He went to a couple of contractors and they said, “Well no, you have to join the union.” He went to the union, and was told by representatives, “Well no, you have to get a job first.” So, it went, back and forth until finally, he went to the union hall in Hayward, CA., where the representative in Hayward brazenly exclaimed, “Well no, no, no. We don’t allow colored people in this hall.”

That of course was frustrating. He was disappointed but kept on looking. Just when it seemed that his efforts would prove fruitless, he met a contractor. The contractor happened to be one of those forward-thinking guys who said “Yeah, I’ll hire you, but first you need to go to the hall in Oakland and”, forgive my language – he said, “you tell that son of a bitch business manager that if he doesn’t allow you into the local union, I’ll have an injunction on his ass so fast.” My father did go to the Union Hall and, I like to think, gave him the message verbatim

My father was initiated and sworn into the union – in the back office. At his first union meeting no one sat on the row with him, no one sat in the row in front of him, no one sat in the row behind him. In addition, they started the Rastus jokes [based on a stereotype of black men as simpletons] and all of that.

One thing I am proud of about my father – and I certainly learned from him, my uncles and my mother, my whole family and even my father-in-law – is you persevere. He got into the apprenticeship program, completed the apprenticeship program and, to no surprise, some of those folks that were so unwelcoming to him, over the time, began to work with him because he worked his way up to being the superintendent, he ran the crew. Eventually, he became president of his local union and later in his career became president of the Santa Clara County District Council of Carpenters.

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He always told me that being in the union was the best thing that ever happened – there is the whole thing about the union generating a pathway to the middle class. Even though he had to deal with all of the challenges being a person of color had to face, he still earned Union wages and benefits and had access to Union training programs. There is still a lot of what you might call systemic or institutional and even outright racism that those who are not impacted by this do not acknowledge it as racism. For example, work is not allocated in the same way. Is that because of racism? I think some of it is, in fact, systemic racism. For example, only promoting or favoring those in your inner circle when that circle is represented by one culture or race, denies that ladder of opportunity to countless others with an equal skillset. That kind of unfair treatment must be called out whenever it is encountered, by all races of responsible people. We are a multi-cultured nation and I like to think that it is up to every one of us to continue that path toward justice and dignity.

### **Apprenticeship**

In my apprenticeship class, which was in San Jose, we had about a dozen apprentices. Maybe two African-Americans, four or five Mexicans, and then about six or seven whites. Therefore, it was representative of the demographics of San Jose. I wouldn't say that I was all alone. There was a burgeoning movement of diversity in the trade, although in its beginning phase.

My entire pathway to where I am today began with apprenticeship. I completed an apprenticeship in 1980 and worked as a journeyman floor covering installer. After a couple of years, there was an opportunity to become a part-time training instructor and I said, "Well, I want to try that." I became a trainer and then got involved in my local union, serving as a trustee, recording secretary progressing and persevering until finally I found myself president of my local union.

### **Becoming an IUPAT Leader**

After establishing myself as an instructor, and local union officer, a mentor of mine, Ray Spallone, came to me and said "Well Ken, our business rep is retiring. Do you think you would want to run for this job?" Excited for the support and opportunity I said, "Well sure. I'll give it a shot," and was soon elected to the role of business representative. People start shifting and retiring, within about four years I became the business manager of the local union. Shortly after that, we merged three locals into one, and I was selected business manager of the merged local.

I did that for two or three years and then in 1996, I got a call from the International union and I came on staff as a field representative for the Western region. I did



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that for a couple of years and then got a call to come to Washington, D.C. – when I say opportunity has its challenges, here I am with a lovely wife who supported me all the way, two kids and we decided to relocate to the East Coast. I am almost positive that my wanting to do something that advanced our family had a big part in making that decision. Relocating from the west coast to the east coast. – What a transition!

I performed my duties as an assistant to the General President, National Project Coordinator for the Union’s Job Corps Program and then as Executive General Vice President. When I became General President of the IUPAT, it was with the support of my General Executive Board led by then President Jim Williams. Jim would tell me early on (being that I was his Executive Vice President) “Ken, something happens to me, you’re the next president.” I said, “Get out of here.” He is a man of his word. He said, “You know the job, you know what you’re doing, and I’d be stupid to support somebody else. You’ve got the vision.”

When I attended my first legislative conference as the General President in 2013, I sat at the dais in the front of the hall as the only person of color there. What I did not expect, was the amount of earnest people to approach me; black, brown, Asian, white, they came up to me and said, “I’d never thought I’d live to see this.” And saying it with admiration – admiration and respect. “This is just fantastic.” One even had tears in his eyes.

### **Advice for Apprenticeship Candidates**

You cannot fear the challenges you will face; there is a part of the trades where you get a little baptism of fire from the veterans in the trade, a rite of passage if you will, we have all gone through that. There is also a point where it goes too far and someone would certainly perceive as, “Wait a minute, is this hazing?” “Are you doing something to me because of who I am or what I look like?” Completely unacceptable. No one should tolerate that and no Union should permit it. Coming up behind my father and my uncle, I knew a little bit about that, but not everybody knows that. Having that little bit of knowledge helped me get through it because I could take a joke as well as anybody and give a joke.

Today, it is no longer a big deal to have a black instructor or to have a brown instructor, or to have a woman instructor. No big deal. Therefore, we are intent on building a more inclusive environment in the workplace. At the IUPAT, we are able to deliver a message and encourage our leadership to be proactive. We have more people of color involved in the union and training than there was when I started out. My intent is not to be accusatory, but we still have to deal with the fact that not many in leadership roles look like me, not as many have had the chance to climb that ladder of opportunity into leadership. Whether it be Union leadership or

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**supervisory roles within our contractor base, we still have miles to go in our journey toward inclusion and equity. In the IUPAT, I am very proud of what we have done to push that ball forward. We are by no means perfect but we are making the effort knowing that the diversity of our union is its strength**

At the time, building trades unions believed they were being targeted unfairly. The Bricklayers, Plasterers, Painters, and Laborers, for instance, had a long history of admitting black members – in fact the Laborers had had black leaders from the start. International union leaders also pointed out that they had consistently opposed drawing the “color line” whenever the subject came up: Competence, not race, they preached, should be the only qualification on the job site.

Policy, however, was not practice: Whatever an international officer's advice or action, local unions tended to keep to their own kind – a practice that was hardly unusual before the 1960s, when neighborhoods, schools, professions, and even churches across the U.S. were racially segregated. Trades that had developed in the late 19th century, like steam fitting, electrical installation, and sheet metal work had been dominated by white male workers from the start, so in cities from Milwaukee to St. Louis, and New York to Washington, D.C., local unions tended to be “lily” white – and the same was true of the Operating Engineers, the Lathers, and the Elevator Constructors. Whether this reflected race prejudice, or the building trades general reluctance to expand their memberships – and keep union jobs in the family – the result was the same: Although black Americans comprised 10 percent of the nation's work force, they accounted for less than 1 percent of building trades apprentices, according to an NAACP study. In fact, in Washington, D.C., the nation's capital and headquarters of

the AFL-CIO and the BCTD, the Bricklayers, Electrical Workers, Lathers, Plasterers, and Plumbers counted no black apprentices in 1961.

President John F. Kennedy had established the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity in March 1961, but it took collective action – and media coverage – to enforce the rules. By 1963 the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the NAACP were picketing all-white construction crews in Cleveland, St. Louis, and Philadelphia, as well as New York City, Newark, N.J., and Washington, D.C. The publicity was both devastating and effective: On June 4, 1963, President Kennedy pledged the government to end discrimination on federally-financed construction projects and on June 22 he backed this up with Executive Order 11114, charging contractors to take “affirmative action” on behalf of black employees and apprentices.

Because the building trades and their contractors strongly opposed government regulation of apprenticeship training – and particularly government selection of apprentices – in July 1963 they established the Joint Committee on Equal Employment Opportunities. The goal was to implement a new civil rights policy that urged local unions to accept qualified members and apprentices regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin, and to run hiring halls and referral systems accordingly. But the plan did not go far enough as far as the government was concerned. As Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz made clear when he

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addressed the 1963 BCTD convention, there was no point arguing, as many locals did, that qualified black applicants had failed to appear, especially if a union had a history of an all-white membership.

By 1965, local options were limited. Following President Lyndon B. Johnson's Executive Order 11246, the Department of Labor had established the Office of Federal Contract Compliance which required all contractors and subcontractors on federally-financed construction projects to demonstrate that they had taken affirmative action to ensure equal employment opportunities – including opportunities for training. At that point building trades leaders began working with the AFL-CIO's Civil Rights Department, and independent organizations like the A. Phillip Randolph Institute and the Workers' Defense League, to develop a plan to increase minority participation in skilled construction work. Together they developed "Outreach" programs to identify promising candidates for apprenticeship training and provide whatever tutoring or preparation was necessary for candidates to succeed in the trades. But over the next two years, little changed. Although nobody liked the idea of racial quotas, Secretary Wirtz admitted, there seemed to be no other choice.

The threat moved the building trades in the right direction: The number of cities partici-

pating in Outreach programs grew from 48 in 1967, to 53 in 1969 – and in that time over 27,000 applicants had been recruited, and more than 3,800 indentured as apprentices. By 1971 some ten thousand minority apprentices had joined the building trades, a 364 percent increase over six years. To be sure, those apprentices did not have it easy – stories of harassment, inadequate training, and a general failure to be treated as "brothers," or, in some cases, "sisters" were all too frequent.



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### **Building Trades Leader Interview:**

## Doreen Cannon

Doreen Cannon is President of United Association Plumbers Local Union #55 and full-time instructor for the JATC. A journey-level plumber for over 15 years, she was elected to the Union's Executive Board for two terms before serving as president of her local.

### **Getting into Construction**

I always enjoyed working with my hands. I'm the youngest of three daughters so I was kind of the son my father never had. I always helped him around the house. He was very handy, working in the yard, building a tree house and things like that. So, I always enjoyed that type of thing. When I decided to go back to work, my mother saw an ad in a paper for a career trades fair for women. They were trying to get women in construction apprenticeships, into the trades. So, I went to that, and I applied and actually got in. I started my apprenticeship the same month that my son started all-day kindergarten. The timing was perfect.

My father actually was a pipe fitter, a maintenance pipe fitter, and he used to do a lot of plumbing on the side. He said, "Go into plumbing. It's got a nice variety, a lot of it's not real heavy work." He just thought it was a good fit. I took his suggestion and followed through with plumbing.

When I got into the apprenticeship, they took a really big class. Usually in Cleveland, our classes are around 15 to 20 but back then, they took a class of 60 because the Cleveland Browns Stadium project was starting and a couple other big projects. There were five women in my class of 60. There are two of us left.

### **Women in Apprenticeship**

I think the hardest part of the apprenticeship as far as women are concerned is the type of work – getting used to being in the atmosphere of a construction site, it's definitely different than any other place else that you've ever worked. It's just a different atmosphere so that's difficult.

There's also the luck of the draw. It matters which contractor you get indentured to the very first day you go on the job. Who's the foreman on that job? What journeymen do they team you up with? You know, a lot of guys are very resistant to women still; they don't want to teach them. And yet others kind of take to it and will teach you and will take you under their wing and really help you go through the process. And help you maneuver a construction site.