

Unit 1: Background of the Construction Trade

Unit 1: The Construction Industry: An Overview

Learning Objective: At the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the demographics of the construction trade
- Discuss industry projections of the future of the building trades
- Identify the development of the apprenticeship from the fifth century B.C. to the modern times
- Explain the role of contractor organizations and their relationships to the unions

Demographics of the Construction Trade

Construction employment went from 7.4 million in 2008, down to 5.4 million in 2011, and then increased to 6.3 million in 2015. The average construction worker in 2013 was 42.8 years old (the average of the labor force in 2013 was 42.4). Twelve percent of construction workers are racial minorities. In 2014, there were 2.7 million Hispanic construction workers compared to 2.25 million in 2010. Nine percent of construction workers in 2014 were female in.

Changing technologies mean that there is a need for young, skilled workers in the industry. Union members in production work are more educated than non-union workers and unions offer better training, higher wages, greater health and pension coverage, and longer employment tenure for their members. Wage rates in construction vary, but union members in construction have a substantial advantage over nonmembers. The median weekly earnings of union members in 2014 were \$1,123 compared to non-union members who earned \$724 per week. In 2015, 19% of construction workers were union members.

Most employees work for establishments that have over 20 employees; however, 84% of

construction establishments with payroll have fewer than 10 employees. In 2012, construction establishments produced a total dollar value of \$1.36 trillion.

The Development of Apprenticeship

The history of the apprenticeship is almost as ancient as the human use of metals.

Classical Apprenticeships

Contracts dating from the fifth century BC indicate that the ancient Greek government would give high pay to anyone who took on apprentices for sculpting and painting. Similar contracts were made in ancient Rome.

The apprenticeship programs became an important part of the European guild systems of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. These programs trained apprentices to become skilled craftsmen. As the apprentices learned and labored, they were not paid monetary wages, but instead given room, board, and clothes, in addition to their training. Apprenticeships became the main way of teaching and learning almost all occupations.

Apprenticeship Reforms in England

In 1563, the English Parliament passed the Statute of Artificers, which established a

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standardized system of apprenticeship. Apprentices had to spend seven years in an apprenticeship, during which they learned the skills and knowledge of their craft. Apprentices performed increasingly complex tasks, until they were judged by their masters to be ready to practice the craft on their own.

Apprenticeship in Colonial America

Colonial America adopted the European apprenticeship system. The Indentured Agreement of 1833 set out the basic rules of the apprenticeship program.

Under the typical apprenticeship agreement, the master would not pay the apprentice. Instead, he would provide food, lodging, washing, and clothing. The master would also teach the apprentice to read, write, and cipher, or compute using arithmetic. When the apprentice completed the program, the master would supply him with clothing, money, and a set of proper tools in the trade.

In return, the apprentice would follow the rules of the apprenticeship until he was 21 years of age. All of their labor, and the products that resulted, belonged to the master. At the end of the apprenticeship, the apprentice was expected to produce a final work product that represented his best skills. If this masterpiece was judged to be good enough, the apprentice was considered qualified to be a master.

Journeyman were day workers, men who worked by day for another master. The word journeyman comes from the French word “jour” (day). During the 1800’s, apprentices were used as cheap labor. Many manufacturers hired only apprentices, who were replaced with new apprentices as soon as they became journeymen. In studying apprenticeship history, you may wish to review the material on the State of Washington

Apprenticeship history pages, online, at: <http://www.lni.wa.gov/TradesLicensing/Apprenticeship/About/History/> The Washington State Department of Labor and Industries has developed one of the best online histories of apprenticeship.

Apprenticeship in the Twentieth Century

In 1934, the US Secretary of Labor appointed members to a federal committee on apprentice training. This group had oversight over the national system of apprenticeship. In 1937, Congress passed the National Apprenticeship Act (commonly called the Fitzgerald Act), which led to the establishment of the Bureau of Apprenticeship Training (now called the Office of Apprenticeship).

Benefits of the Apprenticeship

Apprenticeship programs benefit four different groups:

- Young people, who acquire the skills that will support them for the rest of their lives.
- The masters (journeymen) benefit from the apprentices’ production during their training.
- The nation benefits from a continual supply of skilled labor and quality goods.
- The craft itself benefits, because, without apprentices, it would lose its future craftsmen.

Without skilled and efficient workers, the construction industry would be eroded by substitute products and technologies.

Role of Contractor Organizations

In each aspect of the construction industry, the contractor organizations that employ union workers have formed their own associations. This allows them to work together to promote the quality of union

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construction jobs, resist inroads by non-union contractors, and work with the union to promote union craftsmanship. These organizations have state, provincial, and local chapters as well as a national organization. Ordinarily, your local contractors' association works jointly with the local union to support the apprenticeship program, as well as benefits and pensions.

Role of the Union

A union is a democratic organization. Each member has a voice and can speak openly at union meetings. Union members elect their own officials, and every member helps support the union through dues and participation in union meetings and activities.

The role of the national office of the union is to assist locals that need help in organizing workers, local union management, financial administration, contract negotiations, and training. The national office is also responsible for coordinating the efforts of national members.

The union enables workers to have a powerful voice when working with management, or with lawmakers and governmental agencies at state, provincial, and national levels. A critical role of the union is to represent its members to government leaders and demand their protection of workers' rights.

Conclusion

North America's Building Trades Unions have a long and rich history – from the use of the apprenticeship as a training model to distance learning and other, more recent methods of education. What connects these efforts, however, is the fact that the Building Trades continues to find ways to improve working conditions and educational opportunities for its members.

