

# **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE UNITED BROTHERHOOD of CARPENTERS AND JOINERS OF AMERICA**



# A Brief History of the Brotherhood

## Formative Years

*In the present age there is no hope for workingmen outside of organization. Without a trades union, the workman meets the employer at a great disadvantage. The capitalist has the advantage of past accumulations; the laborer, unassisted by combination, has not. Knowing this, the capitalist can wait while his men, without funds, have no alternative but to submit. But with organization the case is altered; and the more widespread the organization, the better. Then the workman is able to meet the employer on equal terms."*

*Peter J. McGuire  
First General Secretary  
First Issue of "The  
Carpenter", April 1881*

*"Prior to 1881, the condition of the journeymen carpenters was wretched in the extreme...Wages were so far below the cost of a decent living that the most skillful carpenters were often reduced to the point of beggary."*

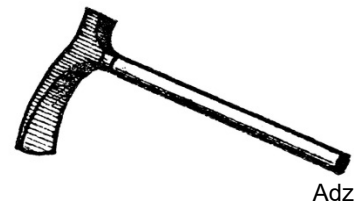
*Gabriel Edmonston,  
First General President  
(October 1904)*

*In August 1881, thirty-six carpenters from eleven cities met in a Chicago warehouse to form a national union. Four days of heated discussion produced a constitution, a structure, produced a constitution, a structure, and a new organization with two thousand members-The Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America.\**

The founding of The Brotherhood was a response to changing conditions in the construction industry in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The old ways of building were disappearing as a new "modern" system emerged. Shifts in the larger economic order transformed the daily life of the working carpenter. Facing turbulent times and uncertain future, carpenters turned to unionism to serve their collective interest.

The carpenter in colonial America has been a man with considerable bargaining power. As one of a small number of skilled artisans in a young society eager for new houses, commercial buildings, and wooden ships and wharves, he often earned more than twice as much as his English counterpart.

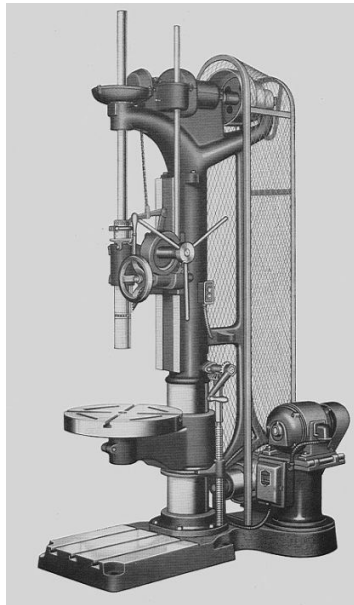
The carpenter who carried his tools across the Atlantic also brought him the European "guild system" in which the categories of workers encompassed masters, journeymen, and apprentices.



Each handled the tools of the trade in a centuries-old division of work responsibilities. The rules were unwritten, but tradition held that masters looked out for the long-term welfare of journeymen

and the training of apprentices, as they passed the “art” and “mystery” of the craft to the next generation.

Then division between the groups was not one of permanent status, but of age, years of experience, and levels of skill. Barring unforeseen circumstances, an apprentice who stayed with the trade could expect, in time, to become a master.



Drill Press

To the extent that masters, journeymen, and apprentices shared a common work experience and vision of the industry, their economic interest tended to coincide. Early efforts at organization focused on stabilizing

prices and reducing competition between carpenters, not employer/employee conflicts. In the 1700s master and journeymen carpenters united in most American cities to establish “books of prices”, volumes that standardized the costs of every aspect of the carpentry trade.

While labor conflicts were not unknown-carpenters in Philadelphia struck for a shorter work day as early as 1791-they were rare. However, to the extent that masters did choose to identify themselves and act as employers, journeymen and apprentices inevitably responded as employees. In 1825, for example, six hundred Boston house carpenters went on strike for a ten hour workday. The masters, still operating under guild assumptions, expressed “surprise and regret: at the workers actions. The puzzled masters rejected the striker’s demands: “Journeymen of good character and of skill may expect very soon to become masters, and like us the employers of others; and by the

measure which they are now inclined to adopt, they will entail upon themselves the inconvenience to which they seem desirous that we should now be exposed!”

As the Industrial Revolution unfolded in the United States the guild system gave way to a capitalist set of relations in the building industry. The dramatic increase in post-Civil War construction activity outpaced the ability of the masters to meet the labor demands. The volume of building activity shot up 250 percent between 1866 and 1906, and upsurge that included wild swings of phenomenal expansion and terrifying crashes. The dizzying pace of new construction was part of a nation in change. Railroads connected once remote towns and villages. Technological innovations wiped out entire handicrafts and introduced the factory system to growing numbers of industries. The United States emerged from a sea of self-contained communities to a unified country linked by

communication and transportation systems.

Mechanical inventions and new building materials altered the carpenter's work. Factories with new machines, cut-off saws, mortising and tenoning machines, borers, compound carvers, and power sanders, enabled the mass production of items such as blinds, doors, flooring, and stairs that had been fashioned by hand. Cast iron replaced wood beams as early as 1852 and by the end of the century the introduction of structural steel reinforced concrete, and the elevator laid the groundwork for the modern skyscraper.

But the industry changed in other ways as well. The opportunities for profit generated by economic growth attracted speculators and middlemen with little or no attachment to the traditions of the industry. These men seized the opportunities created by escalating construction demand but remained ignorant of the issues of craft pride and quality that characterized the guild system. "Jerry"

building and "botch" work were frequently the by-products of the new breed of builders who emphasized speed, productivity, and profitability.

The emergence of the contractor/businessman strained the personal connections that had existed between masters, journeymen, and apprentices. At one time, a carpenter might have worked for a single master for twenty years; by the late 1800s he might have as many as twenty employers in one year.



Bits

At the turn of the century, a Connecticut carpenter named J.W. Brown looked back at the previous five decades of his trade. He recalled the times when his employer "felt himself under a moral obligation" to the working carpenter and his steady employment. Now, reported Brown, the carpenter had become "accustomed to look upon himself not

only as a wage worker for life, but as an appendage to a monstrous machine for the production of distribution of wealth."

## Founding of a National Union

The Chicago convention was the brainchild of Peter J. McGuire who was to become one of the great labor leaders of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A product of the tenements of New York City's lower East Side, McGuire decided to devote his life to the cause of labor at an early age. As a working carpenter, a striker at a piano shop and organizer of the unemployed, a spokesman for the socialist Workingmen's Party, or a deputy commissioner for the Missouri State Bureau of Labor Statistics, he had already won a deserved reputation as a charismatic speaker and a tireless organizer by the time he issued the call for a national carpenter union. McGuire recognized that the turmoil in the construction industry made conditions ripe for the organization of carpenters. If the carpenter's trade was under attack, there was only one appropriate response—protect and defend the trade through the collective action of

its members. The delegates who gathered in Chicago acknowledged his leadership as a crucial element of the union's potential for success. While the convention was unable to resolve debates over all the issues that were raised, there was no disagreement over who would fill the one full-time position. McGuire was unanimously elected to the post of General Secretary. The union grew gradually, from a membership of 2,042 in 1881 to 5,789 in 1885. Some cities were well organized while others remained entirely non-union. McGuire spent eighteen hours a day speaking, writing and organizing to keep the union alive. The national office followed him to St. Louis, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia as he moved around, responding to crisis after crisis. He rarely collected his \$20 weekly salary and, if he did it usually went to union expenses.

In early 1882 McGuire and the union were penniless. The March issue of "The Carpenter", the official

monthly, was printed thanks to a friend's \$30 loan. McGuire did not mind personal poverty, but he dreaded the collapse of the organization. He wrote to Gabriel Edmonston, the first General President, for advice and support.

"We must never think of giving up The Carpenter! Rather give up anything but that. I would sell my sewing machine and mortgage everything I have before that paper goes down. It is our life, our hope, the only power to hold the unions true to each other. I will work at my trade, give up my salary, and kill myself at night to keep things going, if necessary to keep up our paper."



P.J. McGuire

McGuire's sacrifices eased as the fortunes of the UBCJA rose with escalating militancy of the American workforce in the 1880s. At the 1884 convention of the



Calipers

federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions (the predecessor to the American Federation of Labor), Edmonston called for a general strike for the 8 hour work day on May 1, 1886, and extraordinary year that historians refer to as "the great uprising of labor." His proposal initiated what proved to be one of the key political events of 1886, an extraordinary year that historians refer to as "the great uprising of labor."

During the spring, McGuire temporarily suspended the regular business of the UBCJA as he crisscrossed the country speaking to countless audiences about the shorter hour's movement. His efforts paid handsome dividends. More than 340,000 workers

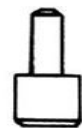
demonstrated for the reduced working day on May 1. In almost every city, carpenters led striking marchers. As a result, union carpenters won higher wages and/or decreased hours in 53 cities in 1886. Unorganized carpenters flocked to the activist organization as the Brotherhood's membership swelled to 21,423 by the end of the summer.

The militancy of American workers in 1886 stunned the business world and surprised cautious labor leaders. The hundreds of rallies, walkouts, and strikes demonstrated the appeal of the eight hour day and prompted the American Federation of Labor to plan a follow-up series of actions for May 1, 1890, under the banner of the nation's single most effective labor organization.

The AFL selected the carpenters Union because, in the words of President Samuel Gompers, It was the "best disciplined, prepared and determined" force in the labor movement. The UBCJA lived up to its reputation. As part of a

massive national and international effort in 1890, over 23,000 American carpenters in 36 cities won the 8 hour day and 32,000 more gained a 9 hour workday. At the end of the campaign, McGuire was able to describe the 55,000 member UBCJA as "the largest and most powerful organization, numerically of any special trade in the whole civilized world."

A carpenter's average wage at the time of the union's birth was \$2 a day. Twenty years later it had doubled, and it was as high as \$5 in the larger cities. By 1903, union membership had climbed to 167,200.



2027 Dowel Pin

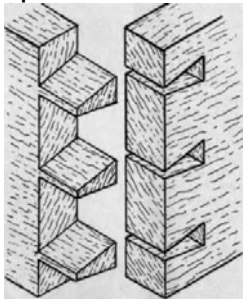
Four years later, eight hours was the standard length of the carpenter's work day across the country, at a time when ten and twelve hour days were still common in many other industries.

The Brotherhood introduced a system of death and disability benefits. McGuire recognized that bread



and butter gains and benefits were the glue that held the union together and kept the membership loyal during the inevitable slumps in the industry. But he also insisted that the union had a broader purpose.

“We should not lose sight of our character as a trade union, and sin ourselves into a mere benevolent society or insurance company. We must elevate the craft, protect its interests, advance wages, reduce the hours of labor, spread correct economic



Dovetails

doctrines and cultivate a spirit of fraternity among the working people regardless of creed, color, nationality or politics.

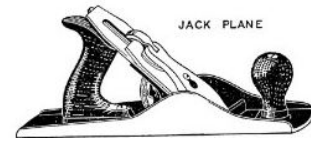
Through the pages of the Carpenter, McGuire promoted democratic participation based on an informed membership. Articles in the monthly included technical features on building news of the

trade, prospects for employment, as well as far reaching and thoughtful analyses of political issues facing the labor movement and the nation. McGuire opened his columns to the finest writers on the political scene to enrich the journal’s reformist orientation.

McGuire did not fear disagreement or open debate on internal union issues. He devoted space for rank and file members to speak their minds on union policy matters. He recognized that the membership was the heart of the union and argued against those who called for more “efficient” centralized organization. “Do we”, he once wrote, “Love more to be ruled by delegates and officers than rule ourselves?”

McGuire believed that unions should actively educate their members. In an era when working people had limited access to educational or cultural institutions, McGuire called on the locals to set up libraries, train members in the art of public speaking, and consider issues of politics and economics

to “prepare [workers] for the changes to come.

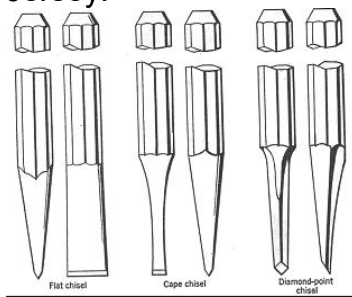


McGuire sought a society free of bitter conflicts between social classes, a “cooperative commonwealth”, in the works of the day. To that end, he played a role in the Knights of Labor and later the American Federation of Labor. “We are not a narrow, selfish trade organization, entirely for ourselves”, he suggested. “We have been and always will be ready to do our share in the general labor movement, whether it be to help the poorest or the highest-paid worker”.

His belief in the principles of organizing and labor solidarity was constant, even when faced with other unions that wanted to organize potential UBCJA members. His priority was more and better organization of all workers in whatever union served their interest best. “What difference does it make to the workingman, whether he is a Knight of Labor, a trade

unionist or a member of the Brotherhood of United Labor? The interest of all is the same.”

Success rarely comes without cost. The years of McGuire’s grinding schedule took their toll. By the turn of the century, his body was wracked with disease. McGuire resigned at the 1902 convention in Atlanta. Looking considerably older than his 50 years, the now frail leader told the delegates he could not and would not continue. “A man wears out like a piece of machinery,” he concluded. The man who founded the Brotherhood and presided over its meteoric growth died four years later at his home in Camden, New Jersey.



## Beating the Open Shop

During the twenty one years of McGuire’s stewardship, the Brotherhood succeeded in setting union standards for carpenters on most construction sites in the United States. The struggle to achieve these goals was long and difficult. Building contractors used all the tools that employers have typically adopted to drive away unionism, strikebreakers, blacklisting, yellow dog contracts, violence, etc. long after the UBCJA had established a firm foothold in the industry, contractor associations continued to attempt to undermine the unions’ power.

For example, an aggressive nation-wide open shop counter attack was mounted in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as employers locked out carpenters in Chicago, New York, Pittsburgh, Louisville, Houston, Milwaukee, and a number of other cities. Frank Duffy, the General Secretary who succeeded McGuire,

wrote in a 1904 issue of “The Carpenter” that building employers had “organized, combined and affiliated with one another, with the avowed purpose and firm determination for putting our local unions out of existence altogether.”

Yet, despite the bitterness of the conflict, the peculiar characteristics of the construction industry made organizing turn-of-the-century carpenters a possibility at a time when many other sectors of the workforce were unable to break through the barrier of anti-unionism.

In 1900 as the brotherhood was rapidly expanding, no more than six percent of the manufacturing workforce was organized, and that group consisted almost exclusively of the small number of highly skilled operatives whose craft knowledge had not been diminished but the factory system. The difference between the organizing potential of factory vs building trades workers is illustrated by the comments of employers in each field. In an era

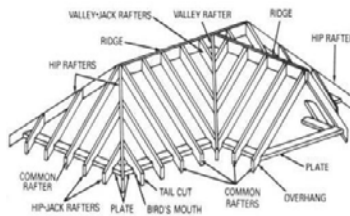


when a U.S. Steel executive could boast: “I have always had one rule, if a workman sticks up his head, hit it.” Otto Eidlitz, one of the nation’s most powerful builders, proclaimed, “It is without question, not only the right but the duty of labor to thoroughly organize itself and it...is a power for good in the trade.”

The differences in viewpoints were not due to the benevolence of construction employers. Rather, the economics of the industry encouraged fair-minded builders to reach an accommodation with the unions. Short on capital and dependent on monthly progress payments, small and medium sized contractors were unable to stockpile resources to withstand the financial strain of a long strike. Furthermore, the highly skilled nature of the work made it difficult for anti-union employers to quickly replace competent carpenters with capable strikebreakers. As a result, builders who were faced with the power of a militant and popular union ultimately chose to forego endless

battles and instead, accepted agreements with local unions.

Additionally, many building employers recognized the potential benefits that unions could provide in terms of apprenticeship training and hiring hall. In a highly volatile industry with boom-and-bust cycles, employers had difficulty making long range plans with regard to labor requirements. To the extent that unions willingly accepted the responsibility of training and supplying labor, contractors were relieved of a difficult burden.



From their perspective, the positive role of the unions often outweighed the added costs of union recognition and above average wages in the construction field.

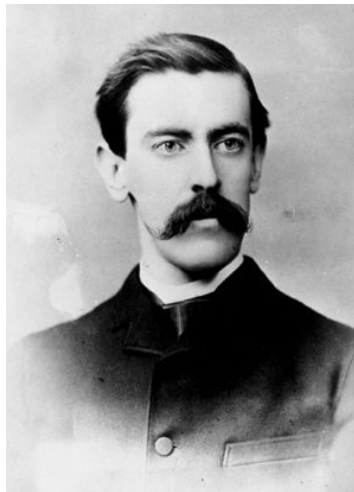
The conditions in the industry thus laid the groundwork for McGuire’s brand of democratic and activist unionism to flourish in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Despite the

intensive efforts of open shop employers, membership in the Carpenters Union reached 200,000 by 1910. A union card became as crucial to a self-respecting carpenter as a complete set of tools. For those who knew the industry, it was a matter of common wisdom that, “the craftsman without a trade.”

McGuire’s successors-Frank Duffy and William Hutcheson (who, as General President, presided over the Brotherhood from 1915 to 1951), altered the union’s orientation. Less intent on carrying out McGuire’s motto of “organize, agitate, educate,” they emphasized the smooth administration of the union operation. Less interested in McGuire’s philosophies of social change, the UBCJA under Hutcheson took on a more conservative political cast. More skeptical of broad working-class movements, Hutcheson’s Brotherhood staked out a tougher position in relation to other labor unions in and out of the building trades. Conflicts

over jurisdictional assignments became one of the primary methods of extending working carpenters' interests.

The basic mission of the union, protecting carpenters' rights on the job, remained the same. With the onset of World War I, the union faced a new challenge, Wartime needs for temporary military housing shipbuilding, and ammunition factories pushed the federal government into a massive construction spending program. When President Woodrow Wilson allowed open shop contractors on federal construction sites, Hutcheson refused to participate in the government's oversight boards.



Woodrow Wilson

"While we have every desire to assist the government in the crisis, we are now passing through," he said, "we have no intention of waiving our rights to maintain for ourselves the conditions we have established."

Despite extraordinary pressures, the union leadership held firm. On November 7, 1917, thirteen hundred building trades' workers in eastern Massachusetts participated in a general strike on all military work in the area to protest the use of open shop builders. The strike persisted in the face of threats from the U.S. War Department. Influential preacher Billy Sunday whipped anti-union hysteria to a higher plane, invoking the name of God to denounce Hutcheson's treason. While that strike was settled within a week, the larger issue remained unresolved until April, 1918 when the federal government approved a new system that guaranteed closed shops in those areas that had them before the war.

Hutcheson's firmness preserved union standards for carpenters. As the war became a memory, attacks on the patriotism of unionists gave way to a closer examination and subsequent recognition and subsequent recognition of wartime profiteering by employers. Secretary of War Newton Baker (who had been a vocal critic of the UBCJA) confirmed many unionists' suspicions when he admitted that labor had been "more willing to keep in step than capital."

Peach brought a new and different kind of battle. Employer associations of all kinds initiated a furious assault on union labor under the label of the "American Plan." Building employers, supported but large industrialists and local Chambers of Commerce, pitched in. They took on construction unions in Detroit, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Salt Lake City, and Seattle.

Contractors in Chicago insisted on a wage cut in January 1921 and

locked out workers after the unions rejected their demand. In June, all the crafts except the Carpenters and Painters agreed to submit the dispute to arbitration by federal judge Kenesaw Landis. The judge's drastic decision slashed wages beyond the initial contractor proposals and weakened long-standing union work rules. The UBCJA refused to recognize the judgment and led the fight against the "Citizens Committee to Enforce the Landis Award" for five years until union shops conditions finally returned to Chicago.

In San Francisco, the Industrial Association broke the twenty year reign on the one of the country's mightiest union shops in the building trades. Financed to the tune of \$1.25 million and in control of the building materials, suppliers, the Builders' Exchange refused to call off a lockout even after the city's Building Trades Council meekly accepted the contractors' original wage cut demand. Determined to crush the unions, the employers of

San Francisco settled for nothing less than open shop and an end to mandatory collective bargaining in the building industry.

While the American Plan did take its toll, the San Francisco experience was unusually severe. The Brotherhood survived the 1920s. The number of union carpenters declined from 400,000 in 1920 to 345,000 in 1928, but this drop in membership compared favorable to the losses of other labor unions in the prevailing and anti-labor climate. Wages in the building trades actually rose by roughly 5 percent a year. The fury of the anti-union campaigns subsided by the end of the decade.



## Decline and Recovery

The American Plan of the 1920s

challenged the status of unions in the United States, but the Great Depression of the 1930s threatened the very existence of working people in this country. The stock market crash in 1929 was a signal to the world that the economy was in crisis. In the months that followed, unemployment rose at the astonishing rate of four thousand workers a week.

As always, the construction industry served as an advance indicator of general economic conditions. In many parts of the country, the depression started for carpenters in the midst of the "Roaring Twenties." By 1928, many local unions were issuing "stay away" warnings to travelling carpenters. Conditions only worsened, however, total construction in the United States amounted to \$20.8 million in 1929; four years later it reached just \$6.6 million. Membership ultimately dropped to a

low of 242,000 in 1932 and fully 40 percent of those members were unable to pay their dues. By the next year, the Carpenter reported that less than 30 percent of the union's ranks were employed as carpenters!

The pain of unemployment was devastating. The incidence of alcoholism, divorce, emotional depression, and suicide soared during the early 1930s. Proud carpenters, whose sense of self-worth was wrapped in their craft and their ability to make a living as independent tradesmen, were unable to put bread on the family table. Local unions tried a variety of ways to ease the pain, lowering dues payments, negotiating for twenty four or thirty hour work weeks, forbidding overtime, and instituting job sharing programs. But all of these attempts were little more than band-aids on a fundamentally crippled industry.

Some union leaders on the local level looked to political action as a solution to their problems. A number of locals called for an

independent Labor party as an alternative to the Republican and Democratic political parties. In 1932, Chicago Carpenters District Council urged the UBCJA national leadership to lead the fight for unemployment insurance system. Hutcheson was wary of such activities. His mistrust of governmental intervention in the collective bargaining process, fueled by his experiences during World War I, made him reluctant to support an activist agenda by the federal government. While Hutcheson ultimately accepted the idea of unemployment insurance, he unsuccessfully opposed the AFL's endorsement of a minimum wage bill in 1937. As late as 1940, after eight years of popular New Deal legislation, Hutcheson maintained his opposition to extensive federal involvement. "Labor," he said, "has known that what government can take away."

Rank and file carpenters and local leaders had less difficulty welcoming the New Deal programs. Like Hutcheson,

unemployed carpenters were not advocating welfare or relief. But they did want jobs. They eagerly greeted Roosevelt's alphabet soup of public works agencies (PWA, CWA, CCC, and WPA) instituted to help revive the ailing economy. Initially conflicts arose between federal desires to put people to work at any price and union commitments to maintaining a decent wage. By 1936, however, federal and union policies coincided to enable skilled tradesmen to move into their customary roles.

New Deal initiatives created jobs for millions of Americans but they did not end the Depression. In fact, almost 9.5 million people were still out of work in 1939. Only the monumental task of preparing for entry into World War II was finally able to generate enough work to eliminate the suffering of the jobless. The war driven building demand and the general post war prosperity finally provided American carpenters with reasonable opportunities and

greater financial security.

The wages of union carpenters rose 15 percent between 1945 and 1949, 30 percent through the 1950s, and 72 percent during the 1960s. While inflation ate away at some of those gains, by and large the quarter century following WWII, proved to be the longest period of sustained improvement in the standard of living of American workers. The nation's labor organizations reflected this growth, representing nearly one-third of the workforce. The UBCJA reached its peak membership 850,000 in 1958 and again in 1973.



## Prosperity, Complacency and Trouble

As social unions took advantage of the favorable conditions to expand into new areas of collective bargaining. In 1950, for example, the New York District Council of Carpenters negotiated a 3 percent payroll tax to support a Carpenters Welfare Fund. The idea of health and welfare funds became so attractive that the national office's Health and Welfare Committee, appointed in 1954, urged all locals to set up programs as quickly as possible. Jointly trustee pension funds soon followed, as well as other contract gains, such as safety measures, travel time, and coffee breaks.

The accomplishments of this period brought additional stability into the lives of working carpenters and their families. Unfortunately, the extended boom and success in the bargaining arena also bred a measure of complacency within the unions. With nearly full

employment becoming routine, business agents often reduced their roles to those of office administration, job referrals, and contract negotiations. Traditional tasks such as organizing the unorganized and membership education fell by the wayside. Furthermore, many union leaders and rank and file members, terrified by the nightmare of the Great Depression, were convinced that job security depended on limiting the number of union members in order to minimize competition for a finite number of jobs.

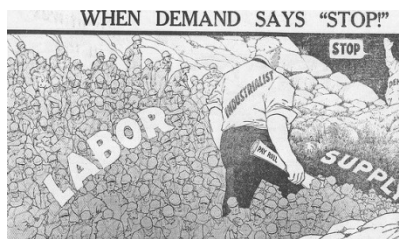
The post war construction boom, however, outpaced the unions' ability to satisfy all the labor requirements. As a result, a significant number of non-union contractors began to appear on the fringes of the industry, particularly in suburban and rural homebuilding. Many unionists remained unconcerned about the potential threat of these newcomers since work was plentiful in the growing commercial and industrial construction sectors. Compared to the physical demands



and the short life span of house construction, employment was more stable and of longer duration on large-scale projects. Ignoring the emerging non-union workforce came at a cost, however. While union trades' workers continued to build 80 percent of all construction in the U.S. as late as 1969, the reliance on bigger projects and a limited membership allowed the non-union employers to win a foothold in the industry.

The 1970s began a new and more difficult era. The face of labor relations in construction has been completely transformed in the last twenty years. While the Carpenter Union and other building trades unions have always had to contend with hostile governmental interference and economic insecurity, they still successfully established unionism as a widely accepted force in the industry by the turn of the century. Since 1970 however, the rapid rise of the open shop has upset the long standing collective bargaining equilibrium in construction. Modern

anti-union advocates have been able to accomplish much more than their predecessors did. Today just 30-35 percent of the construction dollar around the country involves union workers. In some places, construction union locals are little more than numbers in the telephone book.



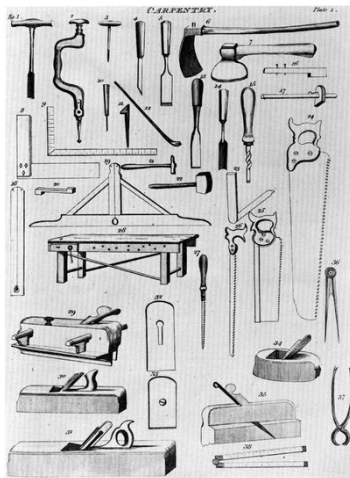
The roots of this transformation can be found in the spiraling costs of the late 1960s. Escalating materials and labor prices offset alarms in the ranks of building owners, management consultants, corporate journalists, and public policy makers. In 1969, two hundred of the nation's top executives formed the construction Users Anti-Inflation Roundtable (now called the Business Roundtable) in order to put a lid on construction bills. The Roundtable, made up of the heads of General Motors, General Electric, Exxon,

U.S. Steel, Du Pont, among others, concluded that the route to financial control over capital construction costs lay in blunting the power of the building trades union.

The Roundtable built political support to weaken legislation, such as the Davis-Bacon Act, that protected construction workers. It laid out a collective bargaining agenda to eliminate union gains. Finally many of its members sponsored and subsidized non-union contractors on their own projects. The Roundtable's efforts combined with the severe building recession of the mid 1970s and an increasingly anti-labor political climate in the United States to provide a generous window of opportunity for the open shop movement.

Non-union builders, gathered under the umbrella of the Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC), took advantage of these opportunities. Today, construction in the U.S. is no longer dominated by union contractors. Open shop and/or

double-breasted firms now participate in and even control many major construction markets. Their mission is clear. They reduce wages, weaken established safety and working conditions, and change the way work is carried out on the job site. They seek to replace the traditional egalitarian apprentice/journeymen system with the so-called “merit shop” philosophy in which workers are pitted against one another and have no real shot at quality training or a decent lifelong career in the trades.



Woodworking Tools 1600-1900

## UBC Meets the Challenge

Initially, many of the unions were taken by surprise by the non-union sector’s developing economic clout. In the absence of a comprehensive counter strategy, a number of locals and district councils adopted wage concessions in order to stay competitive with the non-union sector. Non-union employers effectively undercut that tactic by simply driving their own pay rates down further. At the same time, the ABC grew in political sophistication and became one of the linchpins of the “New Right” that propelled Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980.

“Our organization was set up to deal with the industry as it was in post WWII-North America”, declared a major UBCJA policy statement in 1989. “Today the industry has changed, and we must change with it.” The Brotherhood developed a variety of important initiatives during the 1980s in response to the changing world of

construction. Through Special Programs Department and a reinvigorated Organizing Department, the International has sought to train local leaders in a number of strategic areas.

- The “New Tools of the Trades” manual offers a comprehensive approach to construction research by explaining information-gathering techniques and how to use them in organizing.
- The Comprehensive Construction Stewards’ Program seeks to increase union presence on job sites by training stewards to build a climate for organizing and action among both union and non-union carpenters.
- The Market Area Programs are used by local unions and councils to make honest

assessment of the state of their organizations in order to put in place the appropriate levels of membership education, bottom up workforce organizing, targeting campaigns, and political action.

- National Organizing Campaigns have been set in motion to take on giant companies such as BE&K, P.C.L. and Fluor Daniel, whose scope exceeds the capacity of any single local to affect. This strategy has been accompanied by campaigns directed against major financial institutions, whose lending policies have a major impact on the union or non-union status of construction projects.

The ultimate goal of these initiatives is to organize and reorganize every carpenter in North

America and set decent standards of wages benefits, and safety on every job site. It is an ambitious goal and one that will take a long-term effort to complete. But it can only start with a serious commitment to organizing.

The UBCJA faces a complex and challenging future. New tools, new materials, and new methods of construction are entering the industry at an accelerated rate. In many ways, the carpenters of the 1990s are not that different from carpenters of the late 1880s. But all indications are that the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will bring much more rapid technological innovation. Increasingly, the on-site carpenter is more an “installer” than a “fabricator” with the development of prefabricated materials, modular components, and panelized building sections. The multifaceted general contractor in giving way to the construction manager whose sub-contractor expect their carpenters to restrict their skills to more highly specialized tasks, such as concrete forms,

framing, drywall, ceilings, finish, etc. Union apprenticeship training programs will have to address these new developments while maintaining the high level of all-around craft competence that union carpenters still need.

Ultimately, maintaining and extending a strong union for carpenters will depend on combining an awareness of the dynamics of the future with the finest traditions of the past. The days of “country club” unionism, i.e. providing job security through keeping union numbers down and the unorganized out, are numbered.



Labor’s growth in the future rests on its ability to reach out and open its doors to every member of the working community.

Just as Peter J. McGuire built the Carpenters Union in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by

organizing, educating, and agitating, tomorrow's union leaders will have to embody that same spirit of inclusion in order to organize the unorganized and mobilize current union members. In 1882, for example, W.F. Eberhardt of Philadelphia's Carpenters Local 8 wrote a letter to The Carpenter. He outlined the efforts of Local 8's members to contact every single carpenter in the city on a ward by ward basis. He described how those pioneering volunteer carpenter/organizers held regular meeting across the city to bring the unorganized into the new union.

Now, over one hundred years later, the Brotherhood is using a "new" model in totally non-union Tallahassee, FL. There, several hundred unorganized carpenters, with the assistance of the Brotherhood have been meeting weekly to discuss their common concerns, how to get work opportunities, health

insurance, training, and better working conditions, with the ultimate goal of chartering a new local. In Florida as elsewhere, the Brotherhood's task is to use today's techniques to spread the modern day version of Eberhardt's still relevant message of unionism.

Peter J. McGuire preached the virtues of labor solidarity as he linked the fortunes of union carpenters to the fate of all working people. The importance of these themes has not changed in the last hundred years. The future of the UBCJA is indeed connected to the ability of the entire labor movement to genuinely represent the interests of all working women and men and to stand up on behalf of basic workers' issues, such as decent housing, health and safety, civil rights, and a secure environment.

The American workforce may look differently today, more

multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-lingual. But the underlying principle of organizing all the men and women who make their living at the carpentry trade is exactly the same as it was when thirty-six carpenters met in Chicago in 1881.

