

Worker Power in Construction Unions

Pre-Hire Agreements and Class Collaboration

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### **Worker Power in Construction Unions: Pre-Hire Agreements and Class Collaboration**

This project explores the organizing approaches of construction unions in the United States and their implications for the labor movement. It examines how construction unions, with their ability to establish voluntary pre-hire agreements with employers, are inclined to wield their power in a much more conservative manner than other unions. Through a historical approach, the study analyzes power dynamics and the ideological orientation within construction unions. A comparative analysis with craft unions, like the Machinists, will be conducted, alongside an exploration of the relationship between construction unions and progressive, socialist, environmental, and broader labor movements. The research also compares construction unions vis-à-vis unions, like the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers, which had contentious relations with employers and never reached the status of junior partner in the employer-union relationship. By shedding light on these differences, the study aims to provide insights into the unique dynamics of construction unions and their alignment (or lack thereof) with working-class interests and progressive movements.

This is an important question to investigate because of the many rifts within organized labor. For example, during the fight over the Dakota Access Pipeline, many of the construction unions were on the side of the petrochemical companies who wanted to build an underground pipeline to transport crude oil from North Dakota to Illinois, while other unions wanted to stop its construction and advocated for a transition to a “planned and regulated green economy” (Dudzic 2017). That is, the former saw the future “linked to a partnership with capital” in an extractive economy, while the latter wanted to transition away from that economy (Dudzic 2017).

Similarly, there have been other fights around the privatization of part of the Port of Oakland to build a new stadium for the Oakland Athletics. The construction unions supported the

project because it would create jobs for their members (IUPAT DC-16 2021), while many others, including the Longshore Workers, opposed it because they saw it as a privatization scheme that would also fuel gentrification (ILWU 2022).

### **Implementation & Literature Review**

Most social science literature has not considered the impact of pre-hire agreements specifically. Ample literature has considered the differences between craft unionism and industrial unionism. The former has been described as primarily concerned with “the protection of the interests of the skilled minority,” while the latter is more expansive in its aims to organize the unskilled across entire industries (Foner 1977:197). The differences between these modes of unionism and the tensions between them, heightened in the 1930s and eventually led to a segment of the American Federation of Labor (which had been a craft union federation) to split off to form an industrial union oriented federation, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (Kazin 1998:139). Many labor historians have examined how these different approaches to union organizing have led to conflicts in terms of union vision and ideology. However, I believe that the conservative nature of pre-hire agreements adds an additional layer, as it were, of conservatism to an already conservative craft unionism.

Law review articles have been the most informative for understanding the peculiarities of pre-hire agreements. They explain how construction unions had been operating using these sorts of agreements long before Congress officially legalized them (Murphy 1982). Though I am not primarily interested in legal questions, these articles provide the clearest history of pre-hire agreements situated in their historical context.

## Design

This project will employ a historical approach by looking at legal documents, court cases, and congressional records to understand the context in which pre-hire agreements emerged. In particular, it will look at how the emergence of the pre-hire agreement as a legal institution was a response to available avenues of exercising power within particular constraints, legal or otherwise. Examining the context in which these institutions emerged, and their attendant ideologies could help make sense of how construction unions are situated in relation to other unions and progressive movements in the present.

A comparative historical approach will look at how construction unions (organized as craft unions with pre-hire agreements) have organized differently than other craft unions, such as the International Association of Machinists, which do not use pre-hire agreements. Lastly, looking historically and comparatively at unions that have never reached the position of junior partners to capitalists vis-à-vis construction unions would be interesting. This historical comparative research would help sociologists and labor historians better understand the dynamics fueling the rifts that we've seen within the labor movement and between the building trades and environmental organizations.

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