

Construction Union Agreements: Union Organizing in Historical-Comparative Perspective

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Do the ways that unions organize affect their political stances?

Most labor unions compel employers to negotiate, but the Building Trades engage in voluntary negotiations, relying on workers' skill levels rather than strike leverage.

Building Trades (BT) are frequently political outliers.

- Oppose progressive environmental policies.
 - Align more closely with the petrochemical industry (e.g., pipelines).
- Are not supportive of single-payer healthcare.

Historical: Within-Case Analysis¹

- Historical trajectory of the union.
- Durability: institutional arrangements.
- Structural features & constraints.
- Institutional changes (mergers, etc.).
- Evolutionary or generative approach.²

Comparative: Between-Case Analysis³

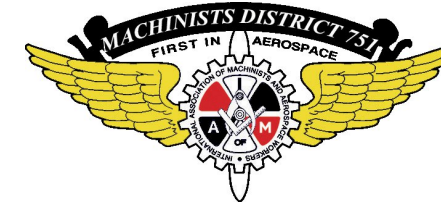
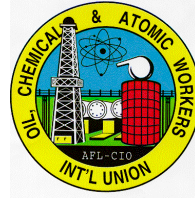
- Differences in institutional features.
- Difference in political outcomes.

¹langeComparativeHistoricalMethods2013.

²reedBoisAmericanPolitical1997.

³langeComparativeHistoricalMethods2013.

Case Selection⁷



- **UA⁴**: United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 189
- **OCAW/USW⁵**: Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (now part of the United Steelworkers)
- **IAM⁶**: International Association of Machinists

⁴schneirovPrideSolidarityHistory1993.

⁵leopoldManWhoHated2007.

⁶mccannBloodWaterHistory1989.

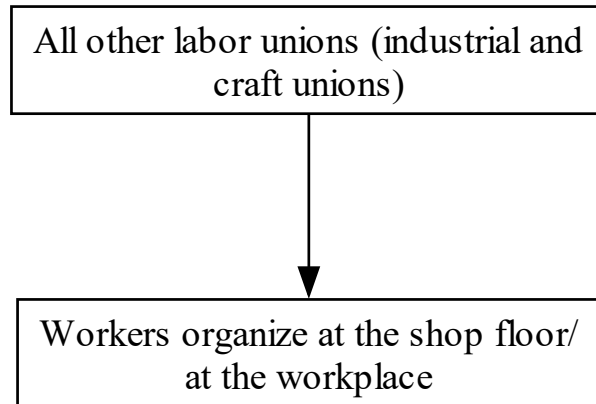
⁷Image sources: UA Local 189, <https://images.app.goo.gl/XZJ2Es3X4TYtJqzP7>. OCAW, https://web.archive.org/web/20010825164515im_/http://webshells.com/ocaw/555.gif. USW, <https://images.app.goo.gl/e4s1xJdefhUXT6CK8>. IAM 751, <https://images.app.goo.gl/Bv4FR6ugSFoq6mb37>.

Case Selection Table

Union	Similarity	Difference	Outcome
Machinists (IAM)	Both craft unions	Industrial mode of organizing	Support progressive social-wage policy (e.g., single-payer healthcare).
Plumbers/Pipefitters (UA)		Involuntary agreements	No/limited support for social-wage policy.
Oil Chemical & Atomic Workers/Steelworkers (OCAW/USW)	Both have substantial petrochemical work	Voluntary agreements	Support progressive social-wage policy.
Plumbers/Pipefitters (UA)		Industrial mode of organizing	Antagonist relationship with employer. OCAW never reached the role of “junior partner” to capital. Support the Pollan Report—creation of clean-energy jobs and a transition from fossil fuels.
		Involuntary agreements	No/limited support for social-wage policy.
		Voluntary Agreements	Collaborationist relationship with employer.Has defended the construction of new oil pipelines Opposed reforms and regulatory policies that might hamper new refinery projects

Table: The most similar cases that had different outcomes were selected.

Union Organizing Paths: Comparison⁸

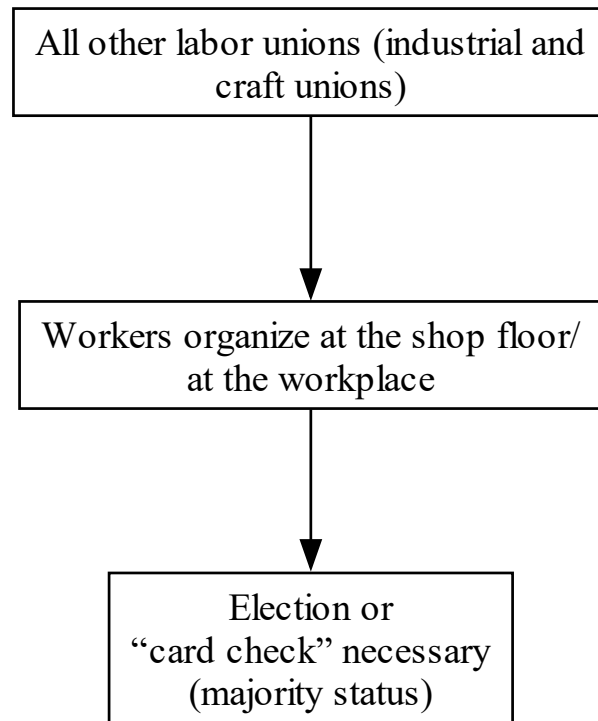


The industrial mode of organizing (left) and the construction mode of organizing (right).

Construction unions may follow either path, but other unions may not voluntarily negotiate the way that construction unions can.

⁸dolWORKCenterUnions; nlrNLRBProcess.

Union Organizing Paths: Comparison⁹

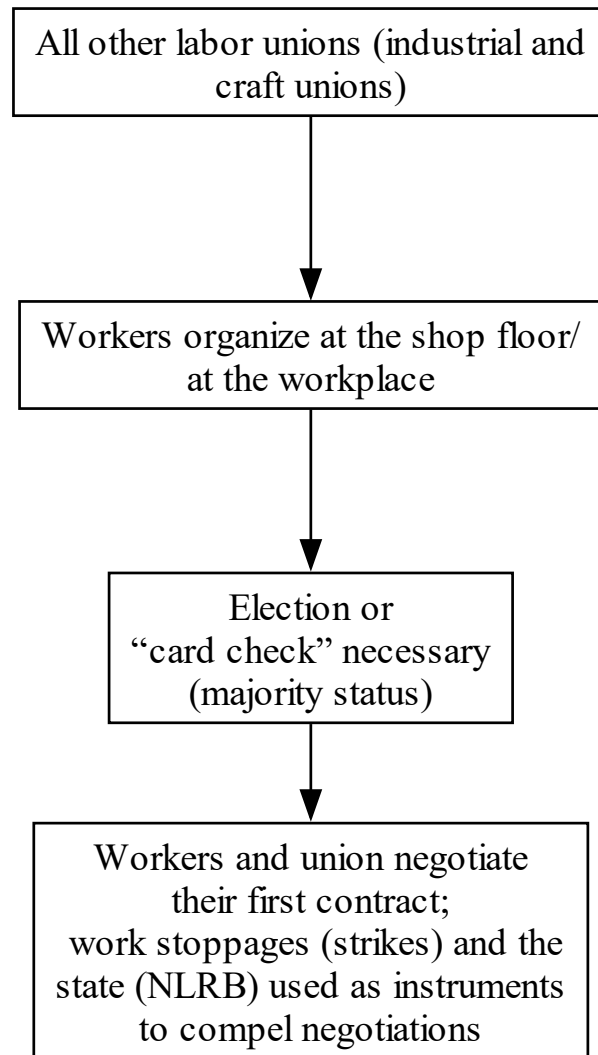


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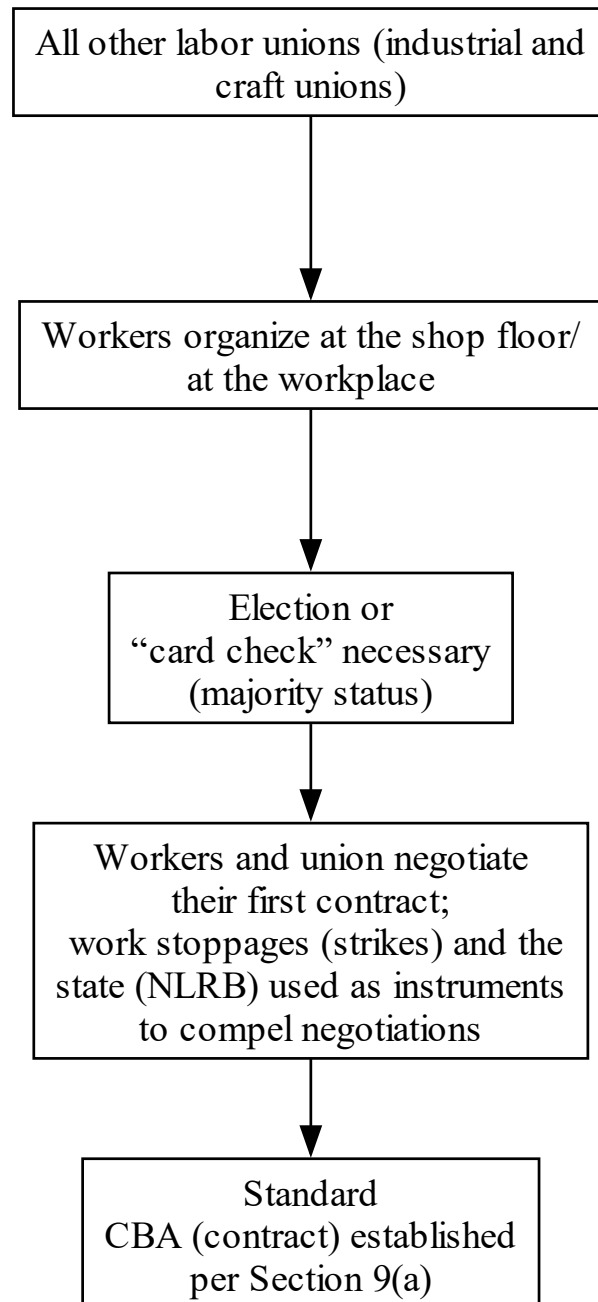


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¹⁰[dolWORKCenterUnions](#); [nlrbNLRBProcess](#).

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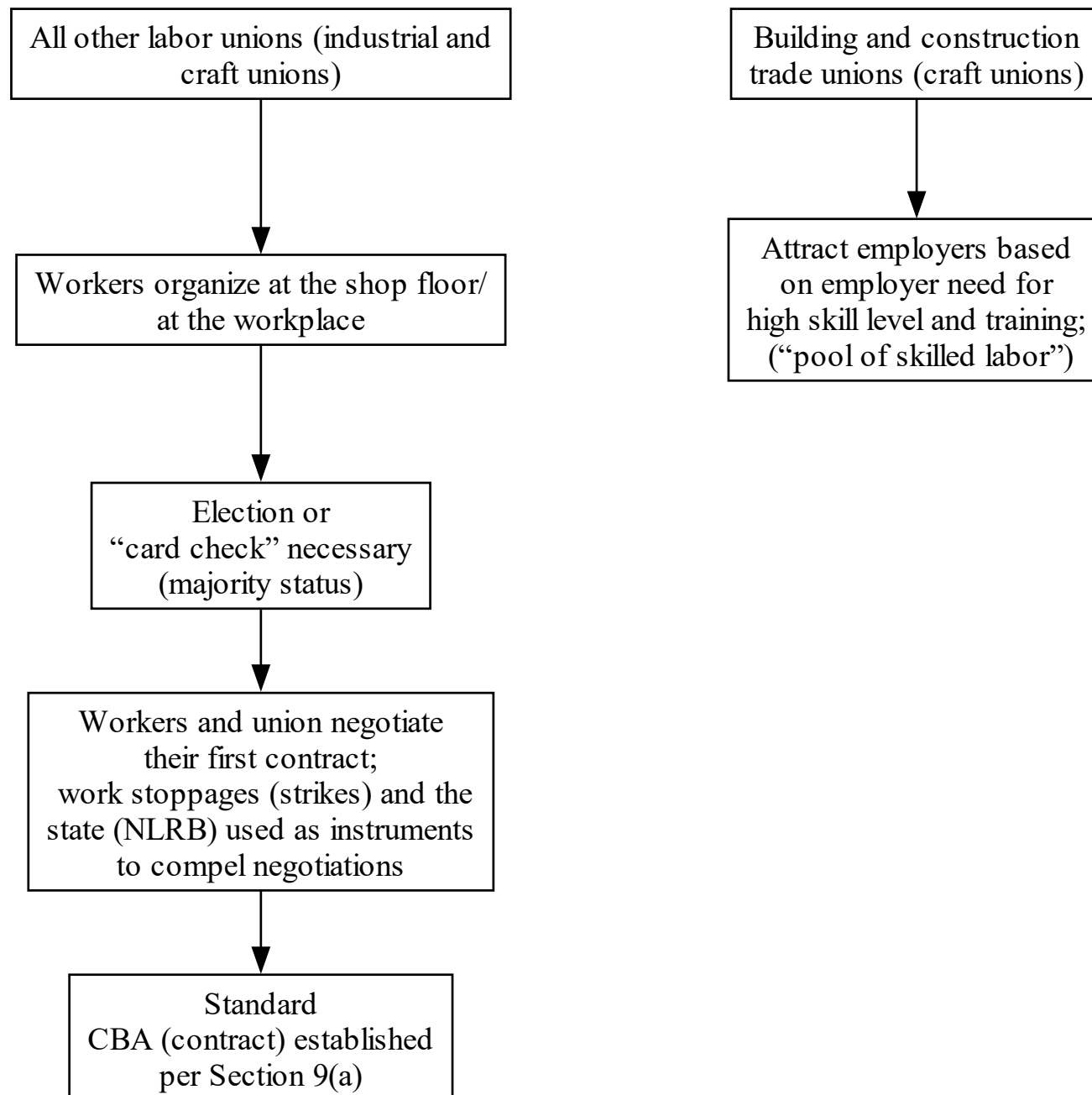


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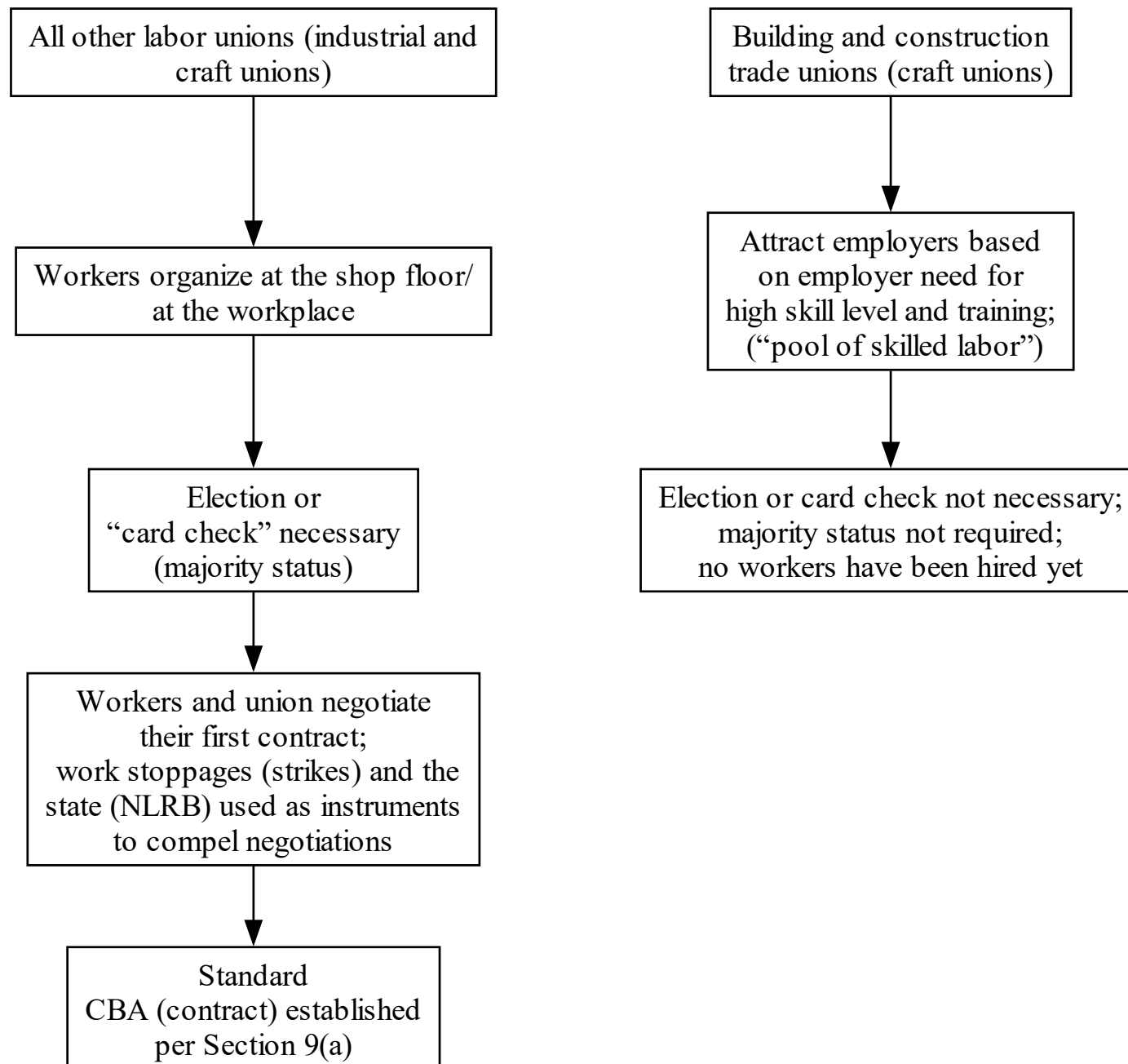


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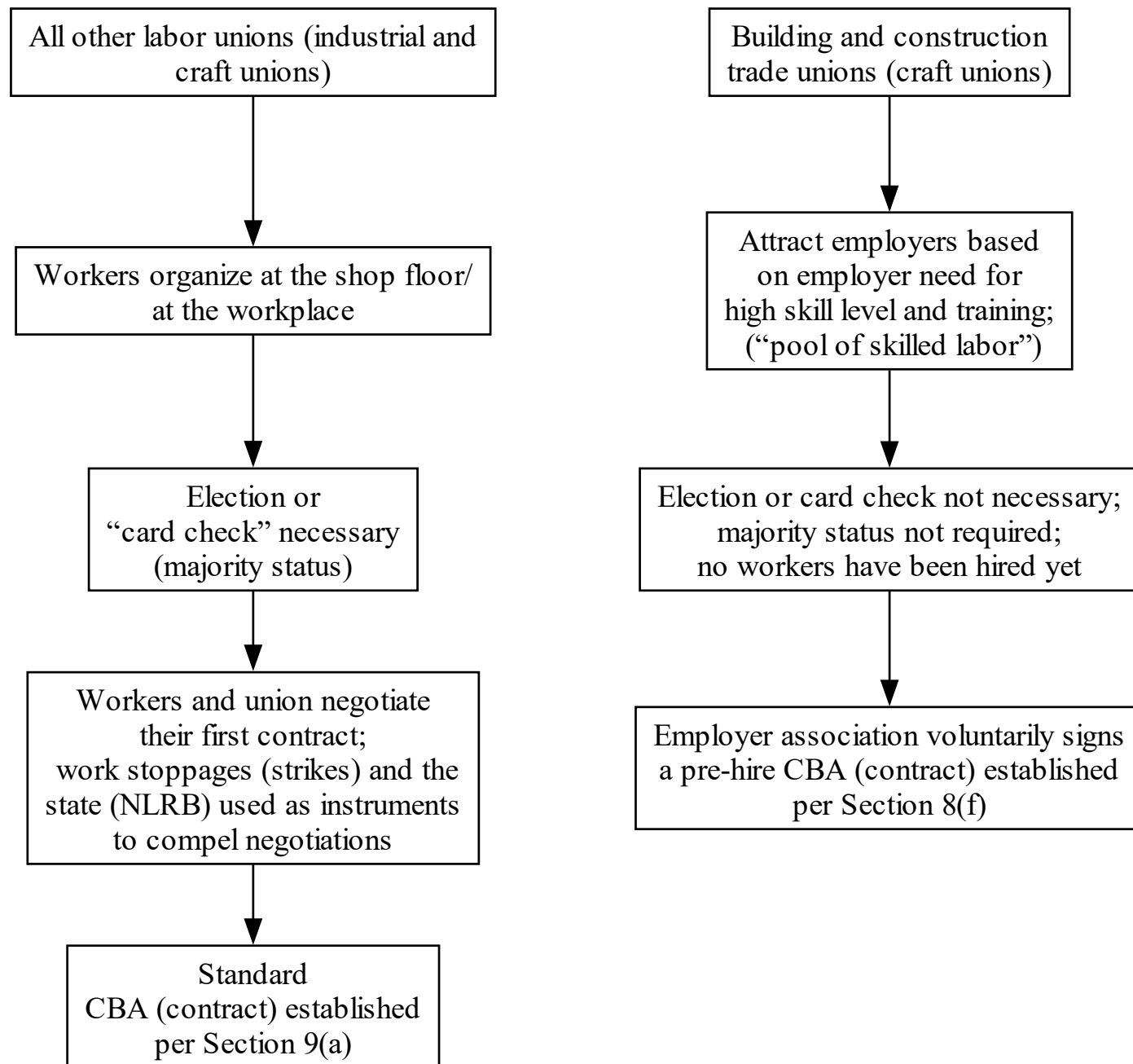


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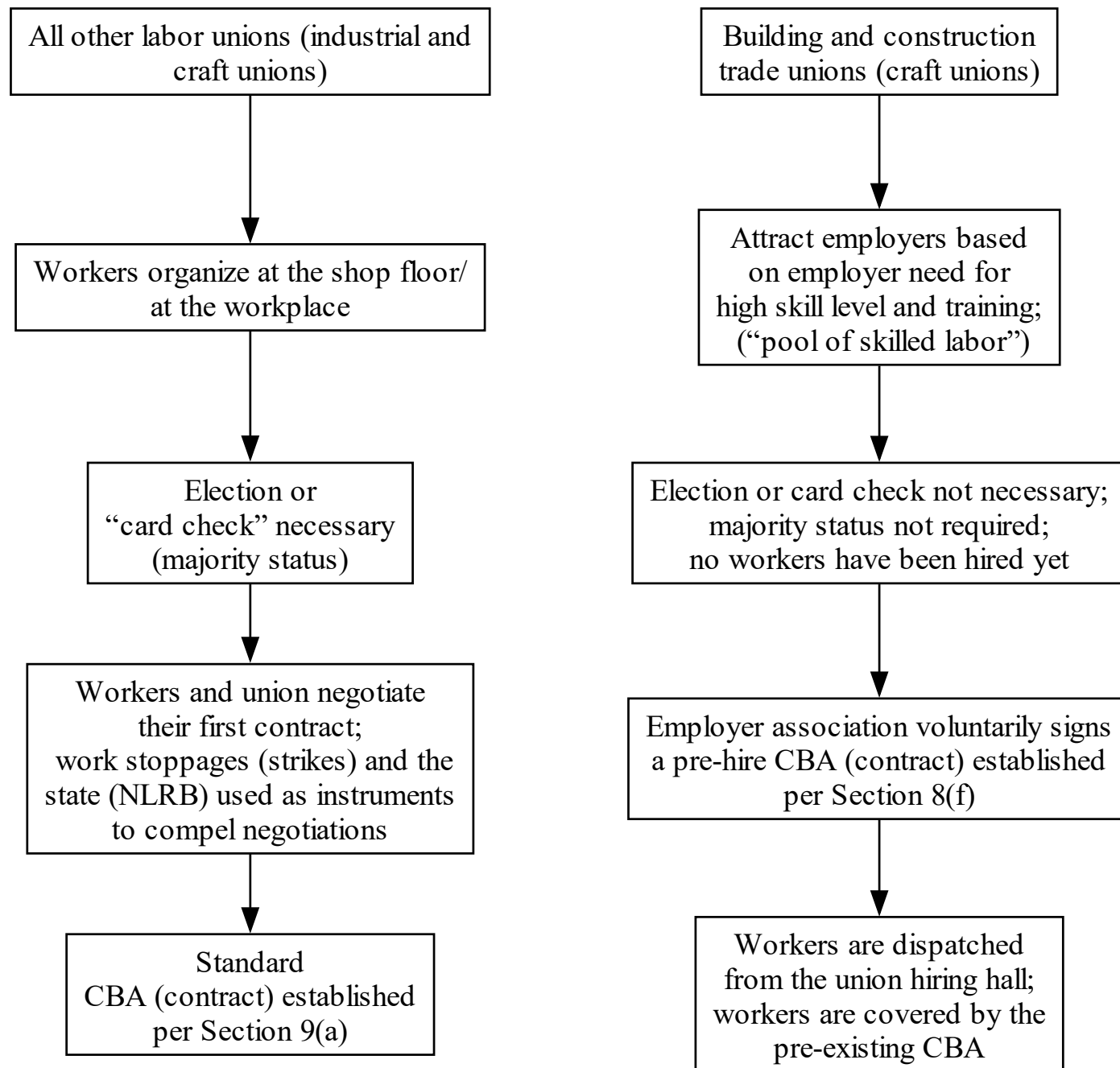


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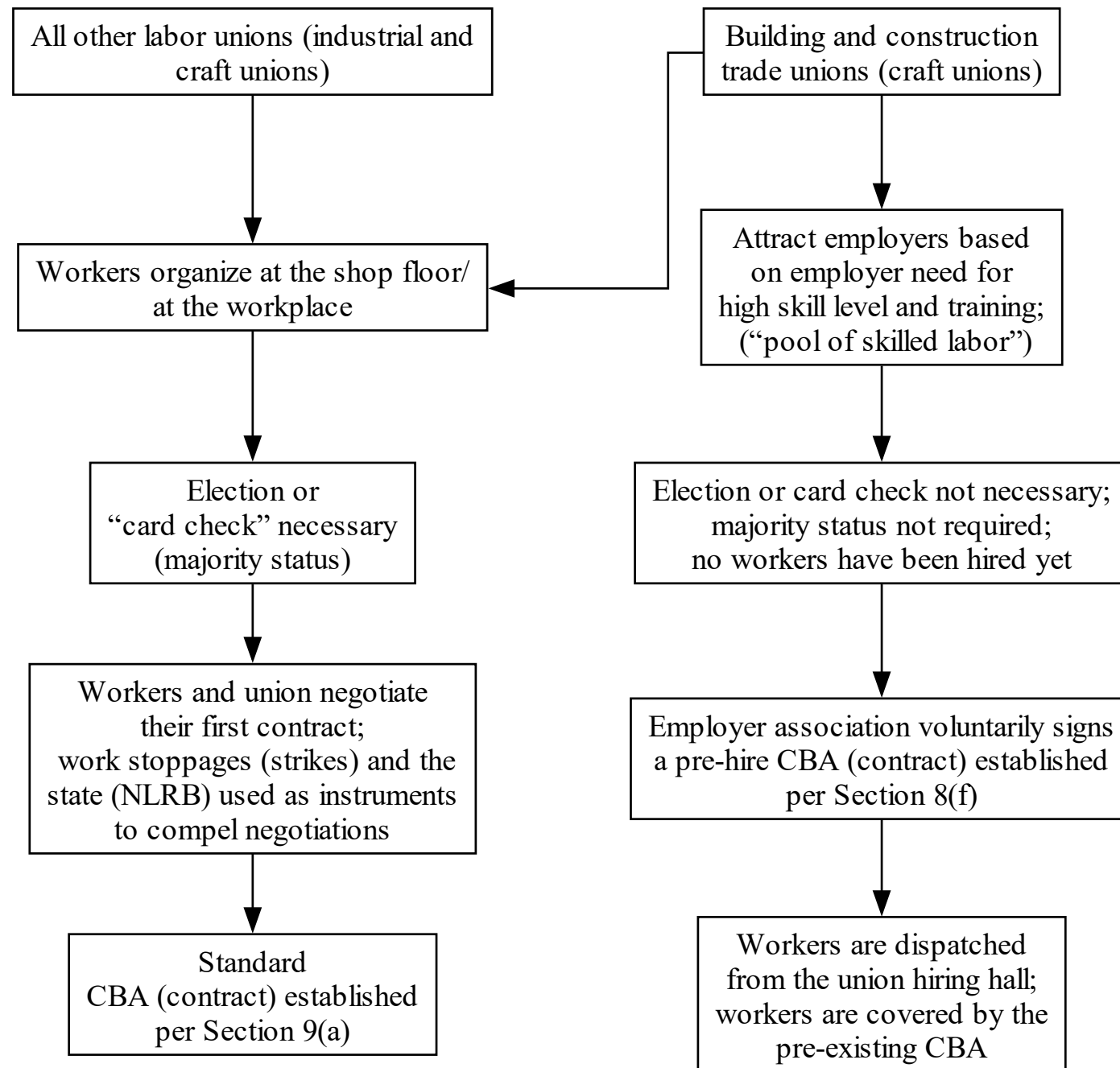


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¹⁶doiWORKCenterUnions; nlrBProcess.

Do unions with petrochemical work align politically with the petrochemical industry?

Not necessarily.

- The UA and OCAW/USW have taken very different political stances regarding clean energy transition.
- OCAW/USW has embraced a “Just Transition” from dirty to clean energy.¹⁷
 - “Just Transition”: workers affected by the closure of plants, refineries, etc. are offered a safety net while transitioning to another career.
- The United Association (UA) of Plumbers and Pipefitters (Building Trades) supports petrochemical industry-friendly policies.¹⁸

The UA **does** use pre-hire agreements, while the OCAW/USW **does not**.

¹⁷leopoldManWhoHated2007.

¹⁸natgasnowNextInfrastructureChallenge2015.

What explains why these unions organize using different methods?

Institutional

- United Association (UA)
 - Apprenticeship and training as a “bargaining chip.”
 - Prehire agreements are the norm.
 - Institutional/structural features shaped the mode of organizing that the BT adopted.¹⁹
 - They could have chosen a different mode.
 - They became a junior partner to capital because of how they chose to organize.
- OCAW/USW
 - Never became a junior partner to capital — relationship antagonistic.²⁰

¹⁹schneirovPrideSolidarityHistory1993.

²⁰leopoldManWhoHated2007.

OCAW/USW vs. UA

Occupational context

- United Association (UA)
 - The pre-hire agreement made it possible for workers to change employers and keep the same wages and benefits.
 - The hiring hall formed as an institution.
- OCAW/USW
 - Same plant entire career.

Political context

- United Association (UA)
 - Did not have Communist Party or socialist connections.
- OCAW/USW
 - Historically had Communist Party members.²¹

²¹leopoldManWhoHated2007.

The Line Between Worker and Owner

- United Association (UA)²²
 - Construction firms are small.
 - Union members as worker-owners — infrequent, but it happens.²³
- OCAW/USW²⁴
 - Members are always wage workers.
 - Employers are usually large multinationals.

²²schneirovPrideSolidarityHistory1993.

²³brownplumbingExecutiveSummary.

²⁴leopoldManWhoHated2007.

Machinists (IAM) vs. Building Trades²⁵

Do craft unions that organize the way that industrial unions do support more progressive policies?

- The Machinists (IAM), while in the AFL, faced challenges similar to those faced by the industrial unions.
- Example: IAM District Lodge 751.
 - Aerospace work at Boeing (essentially manufacturing).
 - Highly skilled craft workers but organized via the industrial union path.
 - No prehire agreements or hiring hall.

²⁵mccannBloodWaterHistory1989.

Machinists (IAM) and Longshore Workers (ILWU)

Craft Union Poaching by the IAM

The Machinists international union has maintained a craft union orientation like the building trades.

- Inter-union conflict with the Longshore Workers Union (ILWU).
 - “Union Turf Wars Expected to Heat Up”²⁶
 - Jurisdictional disputes between Longshore Union (ILWU) and Machinists (IAM) at ports along the West Coast.
 - This is characteristic of craft unionism; sometimes called “poaching.”
 - Anti-solidaristic (insofar as they are committed to inter-union competition).
- **Despite this, the international union supports progressive policies.**
 - Listed as a supporter at Labor for Single-Payer Healthcare.²⁷
 - No Building Trades union is listed as a supporter.

²⁶mongelluzzoUnionTurfWars2014.

²⁷LaborCampaignAffiliates.

Conclusion

**The Building Trades and OCAW/USW have work in the same industry.
The key distinction between these unions is the way in which they organize workers.**

- Building Trades.
 - Pre-hire agreements.
 - Industry-friendly politics.
- OCAW/USW.
 - Organizes workers at the workplace.
 - Supports the creation of green jobs.

The Building Trades unions and the Machinists are both craft unions.

- The Building Trades
 - Pre-hire agreements.
 - No national Building Trades unions support the Labor Campaign for Single-Payer Healthcare.
- The Machinists.
 - Organizes workers at the workplace.
 - Labor Campaign for Single-Payer Healthcare supporter.