

Construction Union Agreements Union Organizing in Historical-Comparative Perspective

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Introduction

US Building Trade unions organize their workers differently. 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.

Do the ways that unions organize affect their political stances and how solidaristic they are with progressive movements?

Historical Within-Case Analyses

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

Comparative Between-Case Analyses

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

Methods: Interviews

- While the Building Trades largely “organizes the bosses” rather than the workers already employed, there is still some variation in how they organize. Some use representation (NLRB) elections.
- National Labor Relations representation case petition database
 - 98 building trades unions filed for a representation election in 2023.
- Emails were sent to union’s office or organizer (email addresses from the union’s website.)
- Three union organizers were interviewed.

Case Selection

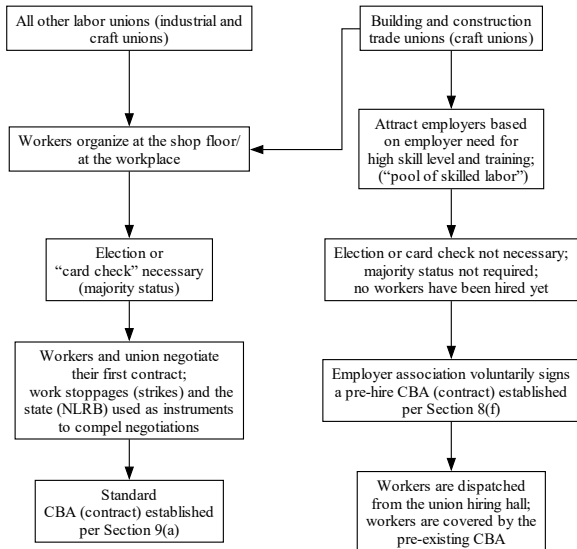
- **Historical**

- United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 189
- Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Union (now part of the United Steelworkers)
- International Association of Machinists

- **Interviews**

- Millwrights
- Electricians
- Operative Plasterers & Cement Masons

Union Organizing Paths: Comparison



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.

Do unions with petrochemical work tend to align themselves with the petrochemical industry?

This is *not* necessarily the case.

- 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.
 - “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.

The UA *does* use prehire agreements, while the OCAW/USW *does not*.

What helps explain why these unions organize using different methods?

- 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.
 - 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

OCAW/USW vs. UA

Occupational context

- United Association (UA)
 - The pre-hire agreement made the movement between employers with the same wages/benefits possible.
 - Hiring hall formed as an institution
- OCAW/USW
 - Same plant entire career

Political context

- United Association (UA)
 - Never had Communist Party or socialist connections
- OCAW/USW
 - Historically had Communist Party members

OCAW/USW vs. UA: The Line Between Worker and Owner

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

Findings: Machinists (IAM) vs. UA/Building Trades

Do craft unions that organize via the industrial path support more progressive policies?

- The Machinists (IAM), while in the AFL, faced challenges similar to those that the industrial unions faced.
- 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.

Machinists (IAM) and Longshore Workers (ILWU): Inter-union conflicts

- But the 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”¹
 - Jurisdictional disputes between Longshore Union (ILWU) and Machinists (IAM) at ports along the West Coast.
- Still, the international union supports progressive policies.
 - Listed as a supporter at Labor for Single-Payer Healthcare.
 - No Building Trades union is listed as a supporter.

¹Mongelluzzo, Bill. 2014. “Union Turf Wars Expected to Heat Up.” *Journal of Commerce*, March 6.

Do Building Trades unions that organize using the industrial path show more solidarity with community groups or other unions? Do they support more progressive political policies?

- By and large, this is *not* the case.
- They pursue this strategy for pragmatic reasons.
 - Not indicative of a different political orientation.
- BT unions pursue different organizing strategies depending on the conditions.
- BT unions often use this approach for service-based employers or where employers have a permanent workforce — usually not construction work.
- No “spillover” into the construction side of the union.