

# Construction Union Agreements Union Organizing in Historical-Comparative Perspective

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# Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Methods
  - Historical
  - Interviews
3. Union Organizing Paths
  - NLRB Election
  - Comparison
4. Building Trades Leverage
5. Building Trades Hiring Hall
6. OCAW/USW vs. UA
  - Institutional consolidation
  - Different occupational context
  - Political context
  - The Line Between Worker and Owner
7. Machinists (IAM) vs. UA/Building Trades
8. Intra-Building Trades
9. Conclusion

# 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.

## **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.
- 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.

# Union Organizing Paths: NLRB Election

## Basic Steps to Forming a Union Through Voluntary Recognition

- 1 Contact a union organizer or start your own union
- 2 Have a majority of your coworkers sign union authorization cards
- 3 Ask your employer for voluntary recognition
- 4 If your employer recognizes the union, you can begin bargaining
- 5 If your employer refuses to recognize the union, you can strike for recognition or file a petition for an election with the NLRB

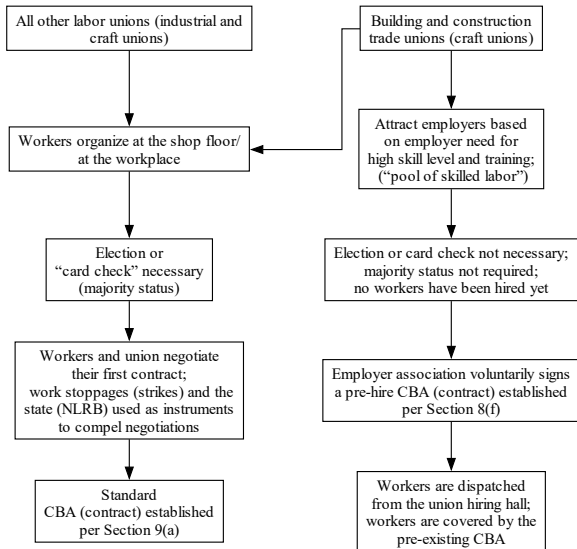
Contact your NLRB Regional Office for more info: [go.usa.gov/xt3MU](https://www.go.usa.gov/xt3MU)

(Source: US Department of Labor.)

Designed for the industrial unions forming at the time of the passage of the National Labor Relations Act.

However, it was not designed for the Building Trades because they were already organizing differently.

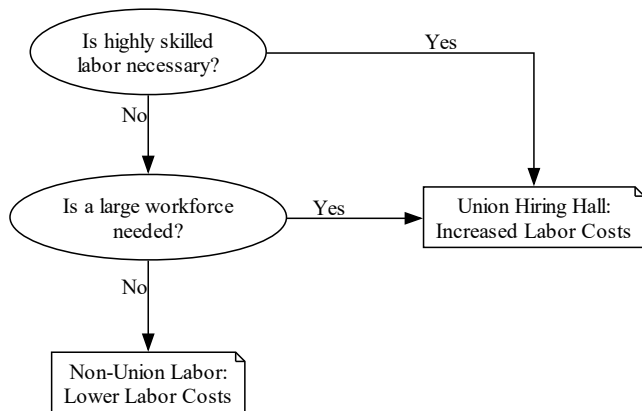
# Union Organizing Paths: Comparison



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.

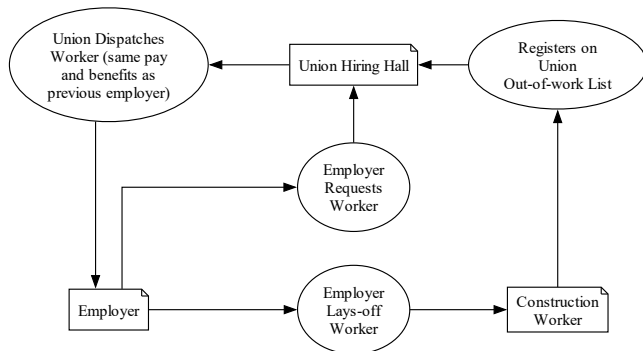
# Building Trades Leverage



Construction unions have more leverage where the employer requires a more skilled workforce or where the job is large and requires many employees.



# Building Trades Hiring Hall



When employers require more workers for their projects, they contact the hiring hall to request workers to be dispatched to the job site.

# OCAW/USW vs. UA: Institutional consolidation

- 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: Different 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

# OCAW/USW vs. UA: 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

- 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
  - Highly skilled workers but organized via the industrial union path.
- But overall the international union has maintained a craft union orientation.
  - Inter-union conflict with the Longshore Workers Union (ILWU).
  - "Union Turf Wars Expected to Heat Up"<sup>1</sup>
  - Jurisdictional disputes between Longshore Union (ILWU) and Machinists (IAM) at ports along the West Coast.
  - Notwithstanding their craft union orientation, they union
    - Listed as a supporter at Labor for Single-payer Healthcare.

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<sup>1</sup> Mongelluzzo, Bill. 2014. "Union Turf Wars Expected to Heat Up." *Journal of Commerce*, March 6.

# Intra-Building Trades: Interviews

- I expected to find building trades (BT) unions that organize this way to be more involved in community and progressive organizations and other labor organizations.
  - 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.

# Conclusion

- The Building Trades