



Industrial Unionism in the Building Trades of the United States

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In most industrial countries the disappearance of different classes of occupation due to the steadily increasing concentration of undertakings and to the growth in the use of machinery has led to the gradual replacement of craft unions by industrial unions. Many arguments are put forward on behalf of both types of organisation. These are exemplified and illuminated by the following history of the long-drawn conflict between the two tendencies in the United States building trades, where the craft unionism which is traditional in the American Federation of Labour is still dominant, in spite of many inroads by industrial unionism.

IS industrial unionism likely to supplant craft unionism? This question is continually being forced upon the attention of interested onlookers by recent developments in the trade union world. In this connection the building industry offers a most interesting field for study. Although it is made up of very strong craft unions, certain tendencies are causing some to express the belief that industrial unionism is about to make serious inroads upon this important industry.

A definition of terms is probably in order here¹. A craft union is an "organisation of wage workers engaged in a single occupation. . . . The occupation may be limited strictly to one simple task, or may include a number of closely allied tasks or crafts. The strict test of a craft union seems to be that each member of the organisation performs or may perform all the tasks included in the occupation." An industrial union is a union which "attempts to unite into one homogeneous or organic group all the workers,

¹ These definitions are in accord with those given by HOXIE in *Trade Unionism in the United States* (1919), pp. 38-40.

skilled and unskilled, engaged in turning out and putting on the market a given finished product or series of closely related products. "

Now of all the building trades unions in the United States the Carpenters' is by far the largest and most powerful. Its membership constitutes about forty per cent. of the total membership of the building trades and is more than twice as large as that of the next largest union, the Electrical Workers'. It is one of the most aggressive unions in America, to be found in the forefront of all struggles with the employers as well as in many struggles with rival unions. It is simply inconceivable that industrial unionism should make any progress in the building industry if the Carpenters were successfully to persist in maintaining the craft form of organisation. If therefore the Carpenters tend to monopolise our attention in this study, the reason will be clear.

The craft union, the traditional type of organisation in the American Federation of Labour, scored a decisive triumph over the labour union when the Federation superseded the Knights of Labour. But since that time, the introduction of machinery and new processes, with its attendant breaking down of craft lines, has proceeded at a very rapid rate. The unskilled labourers have rapidly become the competitors of the skilled. In most cases the latter can no longer say that the interests of the unskilled workers are unrelated to their own. The result has been a very rapid development of the industrial form of organisation. It is significant to note that industrial unionism is able to threaten the position of craft unionism because it is based upon the self-same fundamental principle, namely, self-interest. The craft union was able to defeat the labour union and to triumph over the various uplift and socialist movements largely because of its appeal to the self-interest of the individual workers. Now arises industrial unionism making its appeal upon the same basis. What will be the result ?

The nature of the appeal made by industrial unionism is plainly apparent in the following resolution introduced (but not adopted) at a recent convention of the American Federation of Labour¹:

Whereas, An autocracy of union labour would curse the world as sorely as has the autocracy of capitalism, and

Whereas, By the introduction of machinery, one unskilled man is able to render a large number of skilled mechanics jobless; and

Whereas, Through the process of changing the methods of doing

¹ *Proceedings*, A. F. of L., 1919, p. 348.

the world's work it is not far amiss to state that "there are no crafts at the present stage of industrial development"; and

Whereas, The new industrial democracy must be met with entirely new plans of action by the toilers; be it

Resolved . . . that the General Executive Board proceed at once to formulate a plan for the reorganisation of the labour movement; to change from the craft line plan to one based on the plan of industries or "plant unions".

The introduction of machinery and the breaking down of craft lines make the unskilled workers competitors of the skilled. Now if the skilled workers cannot prevent the introduction of machinery, they must find some other way to eliminate as far as possible the competition of the unskilled. The best way they have found is to bring the unskilled workers into the union. When they do this, it is not chiefly to help the unskilled workers but to help themselves.

The extent of the inroads already made by industrial unionism upon craft unionism, it will be seen from a moment's study, is considerable. Although the Federation has always stood for the craft form of organisation, of the 133 national unions in existence in 1915, most of them affiliated with the Federation, only 28 were strictly craft unions; and of those 28 about one-half were co-operating in loose alliance with related trades¹. There is also the development of the amalgamated union, which may rightly be regarded as a mode of transition from craft unionism to industrial unionism². Here we have the organisation of several crafts into a single union, these crafts being engaged in the turning out of a given product or of closely related products. (Not all the workmen so engaged are necessarily included in the union.) Then there is the formation of the various departments of the American Federation of Labour, such as the Building Trades Department, the Railroad Employees' Department, and the Metal Trades Department; and we should note the close working relationship of the four railroad brotherhoods. Evidence is not wanting that industrial unionism is seriously menacing the position of craft unionism.

¹ GLOCKER: "Amalgamation of Related Trades in American Unions", in *American Economic Review*, Sept. 1915, p. 554.

² Examples of this type are the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen, the International Typographical Union, and the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Tin, and Steel Workers. Hoxie, writing in 1919, stated that "a large proportion of the unions, local and national, in the United States are to-day compound or amalgamated unions" (Hoxie: *Trade Unionism in the United States*, pp. 42-43).

We come now to a consideration of the problem as it presents itself in the building industry, and particularly in the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners¹. It may be well to glance briefly at the tendency toward industrial unionism as it has appeared in the history of the Brotherhood. In the beginning the Brotherhood was strictly a craft union. The local unions which existed prior to the formation of the national organisation were strictly craft unions. A few years after its organisation the Brotherhood extended its jurisdiction to include the mill workers², and in so doing really ceased to be a craft union. The organisation now included men who could not "perform all the tasks included in the occupation". The Brotherhood has continued to extend its jurisdiction claims until they cover a number of different kinds of work³.

On 30 December 1897 representatives of 50,000 building tradesmen assembled in convention in St. Louis to organise the National Building Trades Council of America. Previous to this time local building trades councils had been formed in a number of places with the carpenters co-operating. The objects of the national organisation were "the closer amalgamation of building trades workmen, to establish the national eight-hour day, a national correspondence league, a national working card, and equalisation of wages in the different crafts, to abolish the contract system on public works, to have our differences adjusted by men from our own ranks, to secure legislation in our interest, and to assist all branches of labour to ameliorate their condition."⁴

The Brotherhood declined to affiliate with the National Building Trades Council on the ground that the carpenters would derive no benefits.⁵ In 1902, when a second invitation was extended, the Brotherhood again declined.⁶ Apparently the Council was very anxious to have the Brotherhood affiliate, for it made repeated

¹ Referred to in further footnotes as "U.B."

² In 1888 the constitution of the Brotherhood was revised so that: "A candidate to be admitted to membership in this United Brotherhood must be a journeyman, carpenter, or joiner, a stair builder, millwright, planing mill bench hand, or any cabinet maker engaged at carpenter work, or any carpenter or any journeyman running woodworking machinery." *Proceedings, U.B.*, 1904, p. 68.

³ At the present time the Brotherhood claims jurisdiction over the following divisions and subdivisions of the trade: carpenters and joiners, railroad carpenters, bench hands, stair builders, millwrights, furniture workers, shipwrights and boat builders, reed and rattan workers, ship carpenters, joiners, and caulkers, cabinet makers, floor laying, box makers, hedge, dock and wharf carpenters, car building, and all those engaged in the running of woodworking machinery. Constitution, U.B., 1924, section 7.

⁴ *Proceedings, U.B.*, 1898, pp. 61-62.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

efforts in that direction. In giving reasons for the Brotherhood's refusal to join, the general president stated :

Your board, however, made a careful perusal of the Constitution of the same and could not recommend affiliation at the time. The chief objection seemed to be the fact that local building trades councils have, or assume, superior power to national organisations in the conduct of strikes and lockouts, while experience has proved that it is those organisations who must furnish the funds. The usual basis of representation in the locals of building trades councils seems to us to be undemocratic and un-American, giving locals of trades having few member-equal representation and equal vote with those having many members and at the same time taxation on a *per capita* basis¹.

The Brotherhood's decision to remain outside the National Building Trades Council is not indicative of any fundamental opposition to organisation among the building trades. On 8 October 1903 representatives of nine of the leading trades in the building industry met at Indianapolis to consider the advisability of forming a permanent organisation of the "basic structural building trades"². The new organisation was to be known as the Structural Building Trades Alliance, and the proposition to accept its constitution and by-laws was carried by all the trades represented at the conference, with the exception of the Bricklayers and the Electrical Workers³. The principal weakness of the National Building Trades Council was that it made the local building trades council the unit, which brought it into conflict with many of the building trades unions. This the Structural Building Trades Alliance sought to avoid by creating a federation of the building trades.

The attitude of the United Brotherhood toward this new organisation may be seen in the report of the general president to the 1904 convention. He said in part :

There is no man who has watched the trade movement during the past few years, but can realise the necessity of the building trades' forming such an alliance. In my opinion it will be one of the greatest organisations — provided it is made a success of — in the building trades industry.

Its objects can certainly be commended by every true trade unionist. It will be the means of doing away with many unnecessary strikes, called principally by some small organisation that is not able to help itself,

¹ *Ibid.*, 1904, p. 140.

² The organisations represented were as follows : Bridge and Structural Iron Workers ; Bricklayers' and Masons' International Union ; United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners ; Brotherhood of Painters, Decorators, and Paper Hangers ; National Association of Plumbers, Steam, Gas, and Hot-Water Fitters ; Plasterers' Protective Association ; International Association of Hod Carriers and Building Labourers ; International Association of Steam Hoisting Engineers ; and International Association of Electrical Workers. *Proceedings*, U.B., 1904, p. 59.

³ *Proceedings*, U.B., 1904, p. 38.

nor render any material assistance to any other organisation; whereby they, by exorbitant demands, or some petty grievance, that could be settled if good judgment was used, involve at times thousands of men in a sympathetic strike which I believe could and should be avoided as much as possible, and only called when every other honourable means have failed.

The time has come in the trade union movement when every man should lend a hand to bring about a closer affiliation of all trades, and combine our forces to combat the common enemy of the wage workers¹.

The Brotherhood voted almost unanimously to affiliate with the Structural Building Trades Alliance². On 8 August 1904, permanent organisation was effected at a second meeting held in Indianapolis³. The objects of the organisation were definitely formulated, as follows :

To encourage the formation of local central bodies of building tradesmen and the conferring of such power and authority on the several locals of this Alliance as may advance the interests and welfare of the building trades; to adjust trade disputes along practical lines as they arise from time to time between affiliated unions and to create a more harmonious feeling between the employer and the employee.

Recognising the justice of local trade jurisdiction, we aim to guarantee to the various branches of the building trades industry control of such tributary trades as by right legally or technically belong to the main or basic trades in the building line, and to award to each associated national or international union rightful jurisdiction of new and improved methods of construction or installation of any division or subdivision of existing established or basic trades.

With a view of curtailing the effect of sympathetic strikes in this alliance, it is intended to require all affiliated organisations to submit all grievances, whenever practicable, to this alliance and its Board of Governors, and it is especially understood and agreed that all demands for increases in wages or other trade improvement shall be referred to this alliance or its Board of Governors, for general approval, but such method must be solicited by the affiliated national or international union⁴.

Here we find the same scheme of control as the American Federation of Labour has so successfully employed. The national unions were to be sovereign and no attempt was to be made to take any control away from them. The formation of this Alliance marked the real beginning on a national scale of what is sometimes called "craft industrialism". Of course, the fundamental purpose was to get concerted action in the building industry. Some of the smaller unions, as was to be expected, accused the larger unions which had formed the Alliance of wishing to eliminate

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

them. Since this would be one method of obtaining concerted action and of rendering it more powerful, the criticism was doubtless just.

Previous to this time the Brotherhood had steadfastly refused to form any kind of alliance with other unions — with the exception, of course, of membership in the American Federation of Labour. But the Carpenters were prime movers in the formation of the Alliance and pushed it to the utmost. This was probably the peak of the Brotherhood's enthusiasm for co-operation with other unions. Yet in all negotiations regarding the Building Trades Alliance the Brotherhood took pains to assure itself that no control was taken away from the affiliated organisations, that there was to be no compulsion about the submission of jurisdictional disputes, and that the larger unions controlled the organisation.

After four years of rather indifferent success for the Alliance, the question was raised whether it should be officially recognised by the Federation. On 20 March 1908 the Federation granted a charter to the Building Trades Department, and on that day the Structural Building Trades Alliance ceased to exist¹; although in reality the Department was simply the Alliance continuing under a different name. Twenty national organisations participated in the formation of the new Department, and all but three of them affiliated immediately².

The Carpenters, although they did affiliate by a vote of 23,026

¹ *Proceedings*, B.T.D., 1908, p. 6.

² The following table gives the unions affiliating with the Department during the first year of its existence, together with their respective sizes :

Asbestos Workers	800
Bridge and Structural Iron Workers	10,000
Amalgamated Carpenters and Joiners	7,407
United Brotherhood of Carpenters	162,534
Cement Workers	9,000
Electrical Workers	15,227
Elevator Constructors	2,000
Engineers	16,090
Granite Cutters	13,000
Hod Carriers	8,429
Wood, Wire, and Metal Lathers	6,000
Marble Workers	2,358
Amalgamated Sheet Metal Workers	16,000
Painters	60,011
Plasterers	14,339
Plumbers	18,291
Composition Roofers	1,020
Steam and Hot Water Fitters	5,600
Stonecutters	8,731
Tile Layers	1,732

Total
(*Proceedings*, B.T.D., 1909, p. 24.)

378,569

to 8,244¹, did not get behind the Department with any such degree of enthusiasm as had characterised their attitude towards the Alliance. Those who favoured the new Department maintained that the Alliance had had very little influence, and for two reasons: namely, that it had no real power, and that it was too exclusive, on that account lacking the full support of the building industry. Now it was for those two very reasons that the Carpenters had supported the Alliance, i.e. no power was taken from the Brotherhood, and only the larger and stronger unions were affiliated. The Department, on the other hand, included most of the building trades unions, big and little. (The Bricklayers' Union was the only important union which did not affiliate within the first year.)

Real power *was* granted to the Department. Section 58 of the constitution, for example, reads as follows :

All demands for increased wages or reduction of hours must be submitted to the local council, after approval of the National or International Union interested for its approval, and under no consideration shall a local union or unions of any organisation affiliated with the Department be allowed to inaugurate strikes without the local council's consent².

Further power was conferred in the clause :

Should a conflict in jurisdiction occur, the parties in interest shall hold a joint conference within ninety days, and endeavour to adjust their differences, and if no adjustment has been reached within the prescribed time, the disputed points shall be referred to the next convention of this Department for a decision, and the award shall be binding upon all affiliated organisations.

So the Carpenters objected, in the second place, to this considerable transfer of power to the Department.

Their third objection was concerned with the basis of voting adopted. This was really the fundamental objection, because had the basis advocated by the Carpenters been adopted, they could probably have eliminated the other features regarded by them as undesirable. The basis of representation and voting finally adopted was as follows :

From national or international unions of less than 4,000 members, one delegate ; 4,000 or more, two delegates ; 8,000 or more, three delegates ; 16,000 or more, four delegates ; 32,000 or more, five delegates,

¹ *Proceedings*, U.B., 1908, p. 210.

² *Proceedings*, B.T.D., 1910, p. 8.

and so on. Organisations having seven or more delegates, each such delegate shall on roll call be entitled to two votes¹.

The Carpenters insisted that since the Building Trades Department was a part of the American Federation of Labour, it should adopt the basis used by the Federation :

Questions may be decided by a show of hands, but if a call of the roll is demanded by one-tenth of the delegates present, each delegate shall cast one vote for every one hundred members or major fraction thereof which he represents, provided that the delegate's union has been affiliated with the Federation for the full fiscal year preceding the convention².

A comparison of the number of votes the Brotherhood would be entitled to cast under each of the two systems will make clear the reason for its position. Under the system adopted by the Department the Brotherhood had the right to cast seven out of approximately fifty-seven votes cast by the whole Department, while the Painters, the next largest affiliated union, had the right to cast five. Under the system of the Federation, the Brotherhood would have had 1,620 out of approximately 3,780 votes cast by the whole Department, while the Painters' Union would have had only 600. In other words, under this plan the Brotherhood, with the aid of one strong union like the Painters, could have controlled the Department. Since the Painters have usually been on very friendly terms with the Carpenters, such a combination would not have been at all unlikely. But even without the aid of another union the Brotherhood would practically have controlled the Department.

As a result of these various objections the Brotherhood did not lend the Department its fullest support. Since perhaps the chief purpose of the Department was to adjust jurisdictional difficulties, and since the Brotherhood was at this time engaged in several jurisdictional wars, it was inevitable that it should feel the influence of the Department almost immediately. The Brotherhood's dispute with the Sheet Metal Workers is well known as one of the bitterest disputes in all the history of American trade unionism. As a result of this dispute the Brotherhood has three times been expelled from the Building Trades Department and is at the present time unaffiliated. Prospects for an early settlement of the controversy are not particularly bright.

¹ Constitution, B.T.D., 1913, sec. 5.

² Constitution, A. F. of L., 1923, art. IV, sec. 3.

This controversy and the failure of the Brotherhood, the largest and most powerful of the building trades unions, to support the Department, have unquestionably hampered the development of the Department and of craft industrialism. As an officer of the Painters said: "The Brotherhood of Carpenters has been out of the Building Trades Department on several occasions, and I say it is impossible, at least in a city of 100,000 or less, to successfully conduct a Building Trades Council unless they are a part of it¹." The principal function of the Department was to be the settlement of jurisdictional disputes. Despite its many successful settlements, the fact that it has failed where failure meant the disaffection of the Brotherhood certainly raises the question whether or not it has successfully fulfilled its primary function.

Will the Brotherhood come back into the Department and restore it to its former position? At the present time both parties to the controversy seem to have taken stands which will make reaffiliation impossible. An official of the Building Trades Department says, "My opinion is that they (the Carpenters) will not be re-admitted to membership in the Building Trades Department of the American Federation of Labour, or into the local Building Trades Councils of this country, until they agree to become party to this disciplinary measure which was established to remove jurisdictional disputes²." The Brotherhood, on the other hand, holds firmly to the position that it will not reaffiliate with the Department until that organisation ceases to have relations with the National Board for Jurisdictional Awards. Yet the Brotherhood has twice reaffiliated after severance of relations with the Department, and of course may do so again. A representative of the American Federation of Labour, Mr. James Duncan, was sent to the 1924 convention of the Brotherhood in an effort to bring about an understanding between the two organisations. But even if the Brotherhood were to reaffiliate, the trouble would not necessarily be over. The Brotherhood's habitual method of terminating jurisdictional disputes would seem to indicate that there is little hope of peace until the Sheet Metal Workers have been completely defeated.

Factional division within the Department has prevented its functioning effectively. If it were possible for the affiliated unions

¹ *Proceedings, B.T.D.*, 1921, p. 116.

² Letter to the present writer from the Secretary and Business Representative of the Detroit Building Trades Council, November 1924.

to retain their autonomy and at the same time co-operate effectively through the Department in their fight against the employers, the Department would undoubtedly be an exceedingly powerful combination. But jurisdictional difficulties seem for the present to constitute an insurmountable obstacle. Settlement of the present dispute would not prevent the appearance of new ones. Before the Building Trades Department can successfully function, a general solution for jurisdictional difficulties must be evolved. At present no satisfactory solution is in sight. Perhaps the larger unions will follow the Brotherhood's policy of overcoming the weaker unions. Should they do this and eventually assimilate the smaller organisations, the Building Trades Department might be composed of a small group of large and powerful unions. Were this to take place, jurisdictional disputes would not be so likely to arise. The claims of these few unions would be less apt to overlap, and each union, respecting the strength of the others, would think twice before picking a quarrel. A dispute between two of these unions would probably be a long-drawn-out affair, possibly with no ultimate winner. Such a development as we have just imagined would of course increase the importance of craft industrialism. Present indications are that if craft industrialism is to become a powerful factor in the building industry, development will probably take place along the lines just indicated. Most of the building trades unions would have ceased to be strictly craft unions, as indeed many have already.

Although there is at least the possibility that strong craft industrialism may be developed in the building industry, there does not at the present time appear to be evidence to justify any expectation that complete industrialism will eventually prevail. The building trades as a whole may come to realise, as some of them do now, but as the Brotherhood does not, that a strong central organisation would be extremely advantageous to them; that in order to have a central organisation some real power must be given it; and that if power is given to the central organisation, power must be taken away from the unions belonging to it. This assimilation of power may take place gradually until actual control of the building trades is in the hands of the central organisation.

Just now this possibility seems very remote. In the first place, throughout its history the largest building trades unions has steadfastly opposed any such idea, and at the present time is definitely committed to the principle of craft autonomy. In

the second place, there is no indication of anything like complete breaking down of craft lines in the building industry. Some disintegration has taken place, particularly in the carpenter trade, but it must go a long way before reaching anything approaching completeness. So long as these craft lines persist, and so long as many of these unions hold tenaciously to the craft autonomy idea, industrial unionism will not supplant craft unionism in this particular industry.

Although industrial unionism has made little progress in the building industry as a whole, it is claimed that it has impressed itself upon the policy of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners. We have seen that the Brotherhood is not at the present time strictly a craft union. According to our definition the strict test of a craft union is that each member of the organisation performs or is capable of performing all the tasks included in the occupation. The purpose of organising on this basis is obviously to bring into the union all the workers who may compete against each other. Upholders of the craft union idea advocate it because they believe that this type of organisation will be most effective in eliminating competition. The principle of the industrial union on the other hand is to bring into the organisation all the workers, skilled and unskilled, who are engaged in turning out and putting on the market a given finished product or series of related products.

It is true that the Brotherhood has extended its jurisdiction to include workers who cannot perform all the tasks belonging to the occupation. But what has been its motive in doing this ? It should be noted that never has the Brotherhood attempted to include *all* the workers turning out a single product ; that it has sought to include only those who compete against each other or who in the future might be competitors — “ the carpenter of to-day may be the millman of to-morrow ”. In other words, the Brotherhood has been carrying out the craft *idea*, not the industrial idea.

Possibly the Brotherhood has gone too far in carrying out this idea, and has included workers who are not and may never become competitors of the carpenters, and to the extent that it has done so, to that extent it has ceased to be strictly a craft union. But if in its excessive zeal to include all possible competitors the Brotherhood has gone too far, that fact can hardly be interpreted as evidence that it is tending towards industrial unionism. Rather should it be interpreted as a mistake of judgment in putting into

practice the craft principle. It would probably be better if the Brotherhood, before seeking to include a given group of workers, were to wait until it was certain that they were actual competitors of its members. If the Brotherhood goes too fast, its membership will come to have few interests in common. In fact, at the present moment some of its members appear to have too few interests in common with the rest. In so far as common interests are lacking, unity and singleness of purpose are lacking too, and these are essential to the success of any trade union. The point is, however, that if the principle of industrial unionism makes no more headway among the other building trades unions than it is making among the Carpenters, it is hardly likely to be victorious over the craft principle in the near future.