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Work not Relief: Massachusetts carpenters, craft unionism and the Great Depression

MARK ERLICH & DAVID GOLDBERG

Depression-era labour historiography in the United States has emphasised the two pivotal dramas of the 1930s—the plight of the unemployed in the first half of the decade and the organising drives of industrial workers in the second half. The reasons for this twin focus are obvious. The horrors of the Great Depression shocked a nation sedated by the relative prosperity and political complacency of the 1920s. The birth of the Committee for Industrial Organisation (CIO) galvanised a factory-based workforce long dismissed as beyond the pale of organised labour. Inevitably, less attention has been paid to those workers already in the folds of the craft unions of the American Federation of Labour (AFL). But the severity of the economic crisis raised a host of new and provocative questions for those craft workers who managed to stay employed, albeit sporadically, and forced their unions to reconsider many of their cardinal principles.

Carpenters and other building trades workers were largely unionised before World War I. In Massachusetts, as in much of the rest of the country, it was a matter of common wisdom that "the craftsman without a [union] card was a man without a trade". The Depression threatened to undo 50 years of union building. The crisis also challenged the foundations of a craft union culture that carpenters had struggled to erect.

These tradesmen had adapted to the chronic seasonal and cyclical joblessness that characterised their occupation, but now they faced unemployment on an unprecedented scale. Through their unions, they had established an elaborate set of work rules to govern the job site, but this power proved largely irrelevant when construction projects were so few and far between. They had created a complex but satisfactory system of collective bargaining with the industry's many local and regional building contractors and resented any 'outside' intervention by public authorities. In the context of the Depression, building tradesmen had to come to terms with the fact that their most consistently reliable employer was bound to be a state or federal agency. Finally, they had evolved an ethic of craft unionism that rested on 'manly' notions of independence and self-reliance. The trauma of persistent unemployment and its attendant emotional stresses threatened to unravel the fabric of the value system built into their world of work.

The Impact of the Depression

"The building trades felt the depression before everyone else," says Manny Weiner, whose father was a member of Local 157 (all quotations without references are taken from the collection of oral histories conducted by the Massachusetts Carpenters

History Project, described in the appendix). The testimony of men interviewed by the Massachusetts Carpenters History Project underlines the personal costs of the Depression. "I was born in 1916," jokes Tom Harrington, "born either ten years too soon or ten years too late". Harrington's generation of carpenters confronted a frightening situation. Ready to enter the workforce and support young families, these men instead deferred their dreams, drastically lowered their expectations, and focused on the struggle to survive. "There was no work," Ed Henley states simply. Pittsfield Local 444 reported that 70% of its members were out of work in September 1930. Another local estimated that only one in 20 were working in November 1931. In the Boston area, between two and three thousand of the 20,000 building trades workers were on the job in March 1933. Minutes from the Springfield Carpenters District Council indicate that between 800 and 900 of the Council's 1200 members were unemployed in May 1934 [1].

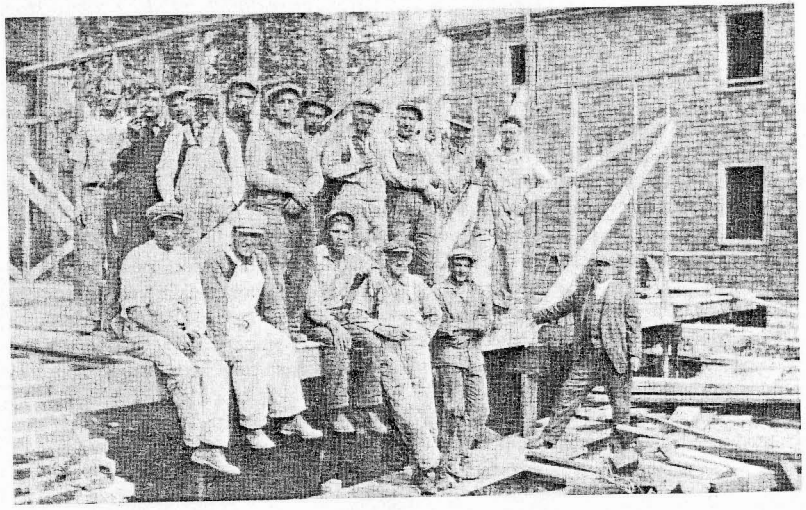

FIG. 1. Carpenters posing in front of a building site in 1925.

Many carpenters did what carpenters have always done: they 'tramped'. Leo Coulombe went to New Jersey and managed to find short stretches of work on the Pulaski Highway, a DuPont factory, and a sewage plant. Chester Sewell pursued a similar strategy. "You just had to keep travelling. A hundred miles a day. Stop at a job and ask if they needed help". Tom Rickard's father regularly gathered a few friends and drove off for a week at a time, sharing gas and food expenses in search of work. Ernest Landry's father worked as a maintenance carpenter for General Electric. When GE laid off all the company carpenters, he left Massachusetts and the United States altogether to return to Canada. But the problem with tramping was that there was really no place to go. The Depression was everywhere, as William Ranta of Worcester explained in a letter to the *Carpenter*.

> 'Keep out, Keep out!' That is the war cry we hear everywhere. Tens of thousands of our members are hopelessly out of work . . . They are wandering from place to place and when they see those 'keep out' warnings, what should they do? [2]

The men who stayed home did what they could. "I would do most anything," says Tom Phelan. "Go downtown, tie on with a trucking outfit for a day. I'd get a buck a day, no matter if it was 12 or 14 hours, for moving furniture or freight, if they needed an extra". Enock Peterson and a friend cut wood out in Sherbourne and Holliston to heat their homes and sold the extra for $2 a cord. "Oh God, I'd done everything," says Peterson. "I'd always try to get a few hours of carpentry work. It was enough to keep the wolf away". Unable to find employment in his trade, Oscar Pratt set his carpentry tools aside for two years after he finished his apprenticeship in 1931. Ed Henley was forced to settle for sporadic dishwashing jobs in restaurants. He had three young children at the time and now claims "if we hadn't taken in boarders, we couldn't have made it".

For a very few men, the hard times of the Depression were someone else's experience. Angelo DeCarlo worked for contractors Sam Abel and Hyman Ecklov. The firm won enough bids to keep a stable crew. "I didn't lose a day in the thirties," notes DeCarlo. Similarly, Al Valli worked right through the worst years on public construction projects for contractor John Bowen, a political crony of the Mayor of Boston, James Michael Curley. The vast majority of carpenters had no such luck. Many of them developed job-seeking rituals, which helped make the hunt for work more systematic, but just as importantly, provided some discipline to a life without the built-in structure of an eight-hour work day. According to Paul Weiner, an alleyway off School St in downtown Boston became a gathering spot for the city's Jewish carpenters during the Depression. Hundreds of men met there every day hoping, at best, for news of work and getting, at least, company and conversation. McKinnon developed his own ritualistic method.

> I took a dime in the morning and got on the street car and went as far as the street car went into Arlington. Up one street, down another street, looking for jobs. Then I walked back home to Mission Hill. If I didn't get no job, the next day I'd go to Belmont and do the same thing.

A job was a blessing, but not without its own complications. "Everything was cut-throat," says Pratt. On the handful of construction sites that were active, he recalls, "there were other fellows who were lined up along the fence on the sidewalks ready to take over their jobs the minute they got fired. Things were rough". Every job was precious. The competition for work that always simmered between workers in the insecure construction industry frequently exploded into open warfare. In 1934, a Holyoke Business Agent refused to allow two Springfield carpenters on a post office job in Holyoke. In reprisal, Leon Manser, secretary of the Springfield Carpenters District Council, threatened to kick every travelling carpenter out of Springfield. In the climate of the 1930s, jurisdictional disputes over as few as two workers quickly evolved into life-and-death struggles. Hoping to avert an extended and bloody combat, Ernest Bessette of the Holyoke CDC set his case before Manser. Bessette's letter reveals how critical every job was.

> Ninety per cent of our membership was out of work and looking for a chance to go to work on this job, along comes two of your members and wants permission to go to work on this job, before any of our own members are put to work, can you think it was possible to sanction these two men going to

> work in preference to our own members, just what kind of explanation could the Business Agent have made to our membership if he had done so? Would you have done any different in Springfield? [3]

Long-established working conditions went by the board. After an extended period of unemployment, Harold Rickard was hired as a carpenter foreman on the Bourne Bridge project. The job operated on a ten-hour basis without overtime pay. Under the circumstances, Rickard says, "no one complained. They went to work". With such a huge surplus of available labour, contractors bore down on the workers relentlessly and without fear. McKinnon tells a story about Boston contractor John Bowen's working style. "He had the filthiest mouth. There would be men working down in a hole on a foundation, and he'd be up on the bank cursing and swearing at them. He'd fire five or six and then hire another bunch looking for work, just to get more out of the men".

The Response of the Locals

Bowen's curses were just a slightly more provocative expression of common contractor practices during the Depression. Builders routinely ignored negotiated working conditions and fired union activists who spoke up. Desperate workers reluctantly looked the other way at the growing number of contract violations. For many union carpenters, all the gains they had slowly won seemed to be disappearing before their eyes. For those who had no work, survival was the first and foremost concern. The few lucky jobholders had other concerns that were complicated in a different way. Should they accept a working environment that had been unacceptable a few short years before? If they objected, they did not work. It was, as R. Marlow of Natick Local 847 pointed out, a no-win situation.

> No matter where you go you will find many good carpenters walking the streets either through lack of building operations, or because they will not accept employment under the conditions offered by some unscrupulous contractors. [4]

The conditions Marlow referred to included wage payments well below the union scale, in some cases as low as the pre-World War I rates of 40 or 50 cents an hour. Union officials tried to slow the practice, but it was too widespread to stop completely. Organiser Charles Kimball publicly urged the expulsion of any union carpenter who accepted below-scales wages. "They are like a cancer, growing from within," he charged, "and are not fit to associate with their brothers in unionism". But even Kimball recognised that such a rigid approach ran the risk of wiping out the bulk of the union membership [5].

Union officials used their internal system of justice to stem rules infractions. At a September 1932 meeting of the Springfield Carpenters District Council, for example, the Business Agent brought up 39 union members on charges for working below the union rate. The usual procedures were followed: filing charges, holding hearings, and determining innocence or guilt. But the Depression required more bending than usual in meting out punishment. When three Springfield men were found guilty of lumping (they had installed window casings and laid floors on a fixed sum per apartment basis rather than by the hour), the Council simply directed them to find another job rather than pay a stiff fine [6]. Under depression conditions, a fine was often an impractical method of enforcing discipline.

Union efforts to check or tolerate rampant wage-slashing reminded carpenters of

the rules that supposedly governed the job site and shored up faltering union consciousness. But the impact of all the regulations, charges, reprimands, and fines was swept away by the economic cataclysm. As long as massive unemployment persisted, employers inexorably drove wages down. Each individual local union was powerless to alter the economic context that compelled members to transgress union rules. The irony was that the locals that fined individual violators were finally forced to accept collectively the very same wage reductions.

In the summer of 1930, the *Builders' Record* reported that union craftsmen were 'offering' to work for less than the union scale. The editor of Boston's Building Trades Employers Association (BTEA) publication argued that in consequence employers should be released from their contractual obligations with the unions and allowed to lower their employees' pay. The Boston Building Trades Council, accustomed to several years of cordial relations with the BTEA, called on BTEA Secretary John Walsh to "substantiate with facts his unsupported statements" [7]. In reality, both sides were shadow-boxing, dancing around a new and, for the unions, potentially dangerous form of negotiations. The contractors not only wanted reductions, but they wanted them in the midst of the term of a collectively bargained agreement.

The initial flurry of charge and counter-charge brought no immediate action, but the issue had been placed at the top of the negotiating agenda. In October of 1931, Robert Whidden, vice-president of the BTEA, contacted all the building trades unions in the city. Calling his letter "simply a friendly overture," Whidden argued that construction recovery was impossible at the existing union pay scale. With wage reductions, however, he assured the unions that Boston's builders and their construction clients would find the incentive to gear up for renewed production. A month later, John Walsh announced that the Association was not looking for a "permanent reduction in wages, but rather an earnest desire to put forth a measure of mutual helpfulness forced by extremely bad business conditions" [8].

Again, the unions (along with Mayor Curley) rejected the BTEA proposal. But without economic recovery, the cuts could only be held off for so long. The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBCJA) national office sent troubleshooter T. M. Guerin to Boston to overcome local resistance. Guerin cajoled, wheedled, and twisted arms. By late November, he managed to convince local Carpenters' officers and enough other construction union leaders to accept a 20 cent an hour reduction across the board. Starting on 1 January 1932, BTEA members paid union carpenters \$1.17$\frac{1}{2}$ instead of \$1.37$\frac{1}{2}$ an hour [9].

The concessions in Boston triggered cuts in other cities in Massachusetts. In the summer of 1931, delegates to the Springfield Carpenters District Council had unanimously approved a resolution stating that wage cuts would not "be of any benefit to us". The following spring, four months after the new Boston rate went into effect, Springfield builders reduced their carpenters' paychecks by \$2 a day without serious opposition. Occasionally, the concession fever did not even require employer initiative. On 4 February 1932, the Greenfield local union voted to lower their wages from \$1 to 90 cents. There had been no employer demand or even hint of a demand. The Greenfield carpenters assumed it was just a matter of time and decided to offer a gesture of good faith by voluntarily suggesting the reduction. Town after town followed the concession pattern. When the dust finally settled, Boston's carpenters remained the highest paid in the state. Outside the capital, no union carpenter earned more than \$1 an hour [10].

The draconian cuts of 1932 whetted the contractors' appetites. Twelve months

later, the employers in seven Boston craft associations proposed further reductions ranging from 25 to 45 cents an hour. But the depression had bottomed out by the winter of 1932–33. Workers' suffering was so widespread that it became harder for employers to justify and win support for even greater sacrifices. In February, a joint meeting of the Building Trades Council and all the other construction unions outside the Council (including the Carpenters) agreed to develop a united front against the employer demands. Representatives of the meeting notified the BTEA that lowered pay in any single trade would immediately produce a city-wide general construction strike. The threat worked. The cuts were never implemented. The union carpenters' scale in Boston did not change until they won a modest raise in 1936 [11].

The beleaguered unions were clawing to survive. Fighting off plummeting wages and evaporating work rules, the locals also faced internal difficulties. The main problem was financial. Without any income or job possibilities, many members dropped out of the union. It was not a question of diminished union sympathies. It was simply, as John Greenland notes, that they "couldn't afford to pay dues". The unions desperately sought to hold the members together. Monthly dues were lowered and the national UBCJA office ruled that members were allowed to be behind in payments for a year without facing suspension. In 1932, over 100,000 union carpenters across the country were in arrears from three to twelve months. The Worcester Carpenters District Council imposed a $1 a day assessment on working members to assist others who were unemployed [12]. Individual carpenters lucky enough to have jobs took it on themselves to help out less fortunate brothers. Enock Peterson covered dues' payments for dozens of unemployed members. Al Valli took $150 out of his personal bank account to pay his local's business agent when the union treasury ran dry. Harold Rickard hired as many carpenters as he could when he was foreman on the Bourne Bridge.

All these charitable acts of assistance were hopelessly inadequate. More and more locals operated in the red. The carpenters in the shoe town of Newburyport had seen their local go broke back in 1925. The Newburyport experience was increasingly repeated as the depression became universal. Between 1929 and 1935, two UBCJA locals in Gardner, and one in Canton, Ipswich, Shrewsbury, Taunton, Webster, and Wilmington respectively either consolidated, let their charters lapse, or disbanded completely [13]. The less marginal locals survived but with far fewer numbers. Between 1930 and 1933, the combined building trades unions lost over 300,000 members nationwide. The Massachusetts carpenters locals were no different (see Table I). The 1933 state convention was cancelled because too few locals could afford to send delegates.

TABLE I. Membership of Massachusetts carpenters unions, 1917–37.

	Number of members		
Town	1917	1927	1937
Boston	659	1054	459
Lawrence	292	212	104
Lowell	287	216	60
Springfield	529	359	236
Taunton	113	96	43
Worcester	211	154	51

Source: UBCJA membership records, national office.

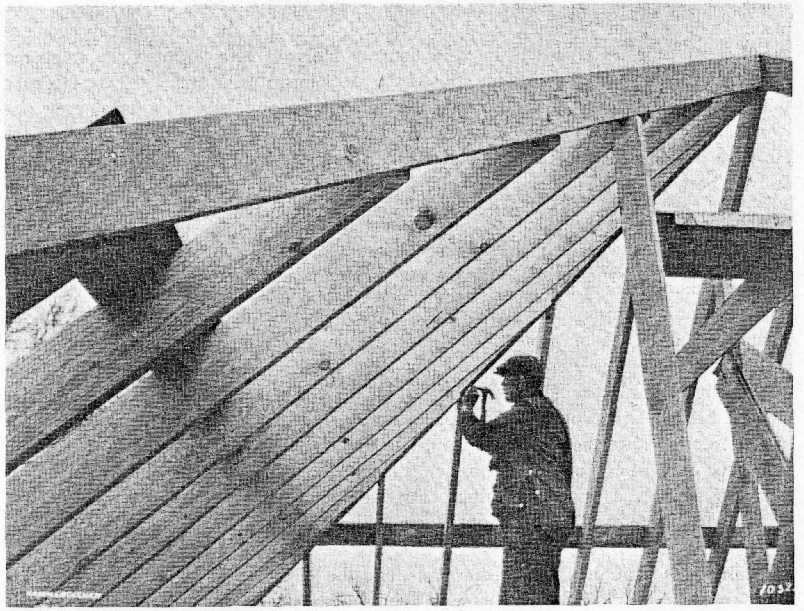

FIG. 2. Roof-framing (mid-1920s) (courtesy of Minnesota Historical Society).

The locals devised a variety of strategies to protect the members and keep the organisations afloat. Greenfield Local 549 tried to refuse any new entries in order to preserve the limited job opportunities for existing members until the national office overruled their protectionist action. Other locals reduced officer salaries or turned the post of business agent into a volunteer position staffed on a rotating basis by jobless members.

As the depression dragged on, a number of carpenters raised the notion of work-sharing as a means of equalising distress. The very idea cut against the grain of the carpenters' work ethic: within the framework of collective rules governing the workplace, it was an unassailable point of pride that success in the industry was a matter of individual achievement. Carpenters knew that stable employment with one firm was not always based on merit since favouritism and nepotism were ever-present. Nonetheless the hiring, firing, and promotion of individual carpenters had *never* been an arena of union intervention unless it was directly related to union activity. Voluntary assistance by a working carpenter to an unemployed member was entirely consistent with the unions' culture of solidarity. Advocating even minimal mandatory allocation of jobs, however, was a daring and collectivist challenge to a traditionally highly individualistic piece of turf.

The unions eased uncomfortably in this direction. By 1929, many locals required union-granted permits on overtime jobs. Fines were levied against members who worked more than eight hours without permission. Overtime bans, however, just scratched the surface of the job-shortage crisis. The unremitting high unemployment figures persisted and suggestions formerly regarded as radical appeared increasingly reasonable. In February 1932 the Springfield Carpenters District Council endorsed a

staggered system of two weeks on and two weeks off for crews on city work. The principle grated, but "we feel," said the Council, "that it is the best that can be got at the present time". Carpenters in neighbouring Holyoke also adopted the staggered system until the town government abused the mechanism. In March 1932 the Holyoke Board of Public Works decided on a policy of open-shop jobs with a union crew one week and a non-union crew another. At the request of the Painters' Union, the Holyoke Building Trades Council placed the Board on its unfair list. With jobs so few and far between, the Holyoke Carpenters District Council supported the BTC action with great reluctance. They issued a statement attacking the city's anti-unionism, but opined that "the so-called stagger system . . . is the best that can be got from the present administration" [14].

The unions tried a host of other defensive measures. The Springfield Carpenters District Council urged contractor E. J. Pinney to institute a six-hour day on his Technical High School project. In 1933, the Boston building trades unanimously endorsed an emergency twenty-four-hour week (three eight-hour days) and a negotiated thirty-hour week (five six-hour days) in the next contract. The Worcester Central Labour Union opened a campaign against the use of labour-saving equipment in construction after they learned that the four major city projects totalling $2 million employed only 14 carpenters. Springfield's carpenters aggressively lobbied local politicians to support a concrete, rather than steel, design for the proposed Ludlow-Springfield bridge over the Chicopee River [15].

The defence of the union wage, the assessments on working carpenters, the declining dues structures, the shorter days, and the staggered crew system nonetheless barely made a dent in the overwhelming unemployment problem. Sharing the available work was admirable and highly principled, but more total work was the only long-term solution. Jobs were what was needed, and the longer the Depression wore on, the clearer it became that the economy would and could not miraculously right itself. If conventional private sector construction had reached a state of permanent collapse, where could building tradesmen turn for the promise of better days?

The Dilemma of the New Deal

The election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932 carried with it a vaguely defined but undeniable shift in public expectations of the federal government. Perhaps no single trade union in the country was less ideally situated to accommodate this new public mood than the national United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America. Not only was the national leadership of the Brotherhood wary of Roosevelt's reform proposals, but they were one of the few groups of labour leaders to endorse and work for Herbert Hoover in 1932, with union general president Hutcheson managing the Labour Bureau of the Republican Party during the campaign.

William Hutcheson was a life-long Republican. At various times, his name had been floated as a possible candidate for Secretary of Labour and even Vice-President in a Republican administration. Hutcheson had indelibly impressed his personal stamp on the UBCJA since taking the helm in 1915. As a result, the national union was a solid bastion of Republicanism in a predominantly Democratic, if conservative, American Federation of Labour (AFL). When the Federation departed from its customary distaste for independent political activity and endorsed the Presidential candidacy of Robert LaFollette of the Farmer-Labour Party in 1924, the Brotherhood was the only major AFL-affiliate that refused to participate.

Roosevelt's introduction of construction job-creation agencies put the union in an awkward position. Hutcheson's extreme version of AFL voluntarism could not tolerate the notion of the federal government as an employer of last resort. He was happiest when the government operated at a long arm's length from the labour movement. He preferred to deal with management directly, with none of the mediating influences of state and federal agencies. In part this was a tactical judgement. In an industry such as construction, the authority of the federal government could as easily abridge the significant influence of the building trades unions as the inherently limited power of decentralised employers. Hutcheson never dropped his passionate distrust of state intervention, consistently preferring the known quantity of direct labour-management negotiations. In 1937, he unsuccessfully opposed AFL endorsement of minimum wage legislation. A full decade after the onset of the Great Depression, Hutcheson remained one of the few public figures who still opposed New Deal legislation and the accompanying expanded role of the state. Labour "has known that what government gives, government can take away," Hutcheson said in a 1940 speech. "Where government has failed, labour and industry can succeed . . . in spite of every handicap that government may place in the way" [16].

Hutcheson was never forced to yield on his machine rule or his political conservatism, but the human wreckage of the Depression compelled him to reconsider his repudiation of federal policies for jobs. Many carpenters shared Hutcheson's misgivings about an expanded federal presence in construction but few had the option of turning aside publicly funded employment in order to maintain ideological purity. Like most working-class Americans, building tradesmen had lost faith in the ability of the private sector to generate sufficient jobs and welcomed the New Deal programme. Massachusetts carpenters embraced the Roosevelt administration. "When FDR took over the reins, things began to improve," John McKinnon says. "People got back to work. It was a lot better. I give FDR all the credit in the world." Enock Peterson praises Roosevelt in similar glowing terms. He worked for the WPA, building schools, grandstands, and athletic fields. The New Deal saved him, Peterson claims. "If it hadn't been for Roosevelt . . . "

Local union officers lived with the Depression more initimately and, as a result, understood the distress of the membership more acutely. Many local building trades officials in Massachusetts led the charge for political reform and pro-labour candidates. The Boston Building Trades Council, for example, called for an independent Labour party in 1932, a position considered heretical by top AFL officials. The Council actively pressured municipal, state, and federal agencies to seek out either private or public loans to subsidise construction projects. Over 1000 carpenters and other craftsmen rallied at the Parkman Bandstand on the Boston Common in June 1933 for a BTC-sponsored 'work demand' meeting. Massachusetts AFL President James Moriarty told the assembled construction workers:

> The key to our whole difficulty is to put people to work. Work instead of relief means that millions can buy bread and retain their self-respect . . . we shall not be content with continued pauperism and doles [17].

The distinction between work and relief was a constant theme for Depression-era carpenters. They wanted work. Relief may have been unavoidable after extended bouts of unemployment but it never became desirable. In the exclusively male world of construction, the equation of relief and dependence was particularly powerful. Rigidly defined sex-roles reinforced the discomfort of a carpenter head-of-household with even

token assistance. The very thought of charity was humiliating for men who prided themselves on their fierce independence. They had learned how to cope with a chronically insecure occupation without resorting to private aid or a public dole. They had overcome the lack of stability with a combination of individual mastery of their craft and collective control of the job site through their unions. They had used the tools of the trade to raise and support families. Now all those years of effort were unravelling uncontrollably. The deft touch of the master carpenter was useless without a job and the carefully constructed work-rules went by the board when union members were forced to accept substandard wages and working conditions.

The idea of unemployed relief assistance ran counter to most of the assumptions and aspirations of American carpenters in the early 1930s, including those who were out of work. The national UBCJA rejected the concept as an illegitimate federal policy and rank-and-file carpenters viewed relief as a stigma, a stinging brand of personal failure. In the mid- and late-1930s attitudes towards relief shifted dramatically. By that time, most American workers had come to the conclusion that their suffering was caused, not by their own decisions, but by national and international economic developments. Still, the initial horrors of the dole never completely disappeared. Thus, whatever other differences existed, the absolute political priority of jobs-creation programmes over a more comprehensive relief system united every Brotherhood member, from Hutcheson to the unemployed carpenter on the street.

Union carpenters welcomed Roosevelt's stabs at construction works programmes but, like Hutcheson, they ultimately preferred private building. The industry had evolved its own set of idiosyncracies that building trades workers liked to think made them unique and incomprehensible to outsiders. Even with a legacy of bitter industrial conflicts, tradesmen were far more likely to consider contractors, especially those who came up from the ranks, as part of the 'club' than any state or federal bureaucrat. Unlike a factory owner, the head of a construction firm was usually visible to the workers, occasionally exchanging pleasantries on a first-name basis. The builder knew the industry, the tools, the terminology, and the feel of a construction site. He was a member, if an unequal one, of the construction family and, most importantly, he had a tradition of collective bargaining. Managers of public works agencies shared none of those bonds. They were government appointees whose loyalties to the political party in power transcended any affinities for the industry.

Initial public policies did nothing to overcome these misgivings. Government officials were seeking methods to put people back to work. Carpenters acknowledged that work had to be found for all the unemployed, but they did not want their industry to become the repository for every jobless American. Having spent their working lives in the construction field, carpenters expected that construction jobs programmes should give priority to experienced craftsmen. In addition, they believed those jobs should be carried out under customary, i.e. union, working conditions. They found, to their dismay, that municipal, state, and federal officials did not necessarily agree. On the contrary, some politicians used the opportunity to vent their anti-labour animus. In the winter of 1931–32, for example, the Worcester Mayor's Unemployment Committee referred unemployed tradesmen to the notoriously anti-union E. J. Cross at 50 cents an hour [18].

The first federal and state projects also ignored labour agreements. Ovila Marceau worked on a Federal Emergency Relief Administration project in Western Massachusetts for 50 cents an hour. In 1933, when the National Recovery Administration (NRA) funded several highway construction contracts in Massachusetts, the state Commission

on Public Works set the pay scale for all skilled workers at 55 cents. The following year, the City of Springfield paid carpenters from 56 to 64 cents for concrete work on the city sewer system. The UBC resented the sabotage of the union rate with taxpayers' money. The Massachusetts State Council of Carpenters initiated a statewide letter campaign to Governor Joseph Ely to protest at the 55 cent highway rate, claiming that it was "a sweat shop rate and in direct violation of the spirit and intent of the NRA" [19].

Despite the low wages, publicly funded projects offered the only alternative to unemployment. In 1933, the Springfield District Council allowed carpenters on welfare permission to do carpentry work at the city farm as long as the welfare board gave them $1 credit for every hour they put in. Carpenters were careful to distinguish between criticism of the programmes and of their abuses. In January 1934 a resolution from the State Council wholeheartedly supported the NRA, Public Works Administration (PWA), and Civil Works Administration (CWA), but also noted that "some of the officials in the several cities and towns who are handling the CWA programs are not paying the stipulated wages and some of the contractors on PWA are violating the intent and meaning of the act as it relates to hours and wages". As a solution, the Council suggested uniform state-wide standards for all the programmes including a $1.20 an hour wage [20].

For the next few years, building trades unions and New Deal administrators haggled over wages and hiring policies. The union position was straightforward: preferential hiring for union craftsmen, union pay scales, and publicly-funded private contracts rather than direct government employment whenever possible. Roosevelt's position was less clear. Administration officials constantly developed and redeveloped regulations as Congress allocated more funds and created new agencies. Through 1935 and 1936, guidelines on PWA and Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects shifted from month to month depending on the individual state administrator, the political influence of the unions, and the latest directive from Washington.

In July 1935, the Massachusetts Building Trades Council met to consider a proposed six-state strike against a suggested PWA and WPA hourly scale of 65 cents for 130 hours of work a month for all skilled mechanics. Throughout the summer and fall, Building Trades Council leaders negotiated with Arthur Rotch, WPA administrator in Massachusetts. By the beginning of winter, Rotch received an order from Washington allowing him to set wages at the prevailing rate. However, as soon as the unions had won the battle on wages, Harry Hopkins issued a series of contradictory hiring directives from Washington that re-ignited union anger. Hopkins, Roosevelt's right-hand man, had agreed with many of the unions' arguments when he accepted the top post at the WPA. Though his primary responsibility was to provide as many jobs as possible within budgetary constraints, Hopkins announced that he would not accomplish his mission at the expense of the private sector and its system of collective bargaining in the construction industry [21].

In August 1935, Hopkins issued Administrative Order No. 15 requiring WPA projects using private employers to give union workers preference. This directive simply maintained traditional employment practices in the industry. Four months later, Hopkins amended the order. He still allowed union preference but only after priority was given to residents of the 'political subdivision' in which the work was being carried out. This effectively knocked out any union tradesman who lived outside the specified area. Once again, the Massachusetts Building Trades Council threatened to strike. In early January 1936, the WPA head countermanded both of his previous orders and

ruled that 90% of all WPA project employees must be drawn from the relief rolls of the US Employment Service.

Hopkins' ruling angered union workers. As they saw it, the WPA would reward those who chose the dependent life of the dole and penalise those who had been too proud to accept charity. The BTC immediately moved from threats to action: 600 craftsmen in Boston and Newton, and 200 in Waltham, Concord, Framingham, and Natick, walked off WPA jobs in protest [22]. For the next two months, a comedy of bureaucratic bungling governed the dispute. The WPA rescinded the ruling on 18 January, only to restore it on 25 February. Finally, on 16 March, Massachusetts WPA director Paul Edwards agreed to a 50–50 split from the relief rolls and the union hiring halls. *Our World*, a Boston labour paper, reported satisfaction among building trades leaders with the settlement:

> This means that those men whom the depression had hit as hard as any others but yet had preferred suffering rather than stoop to beg relief, will no longer be denied jobs as union men who know their job, irrespective whether their names are on the relief rolls [23].

In Massachusetts, at least, organised building-trades workers had resolved their basic differences with the WPA. Periodic flare-ups continued to occur, but the unions generally refocused on private contractors, such as John Bowen, who persisted in paying below the rate or hiring non-union tradesmen. The employment situation improved slightly in the second half of the decade though it never dropped into single figures. Raises in 1936 and 1937 brought the union carpenter's wages back to its pre-Depression high of $\$1.37\frac{1}{2}$. The economy had by no means returned to normal, but mild gains combined with the dramatic upsurge of organisation among industrial workers encouraged construction workers to return to some of their more militant habits. In September 1937, 330 carpenters and other tradesmen walked off the $3.7 million 17-storey Suffolk County Courthouse in protest at the presence of non-union granite cutters [24]. A sympathetic action (or a construction project, for that matter) of that scale would have been unthinkable five years earlier.

Despite the mild improvement in the private sector, the dominant themes for union carpenters in the 1930s were their ambivalent feelings toward the New Deal and the federal role in the construction industry. Union officers attempted to resolve their conflicting attitudes by viewing the federal government as just another employer. By and large, they were unwilling to enter discussions about the proper role of the state in social and economic policy. They preferred a hands-on approach: if the government planned to act as a major consumer of construction services, the unions insisted that it play by the same rules as any other employer. Most construction union leaders had little use for Keynesian pump-priming theories; if the government wants to build, union leaders proclaimed, it must operate under guidelines established by collective bargaining.

Union solutions were equally simple. Most union officials welcomed federal funding but all hoped to minimise direct government administration, preferring the familiar adversarial relationship with contractors and employer associations. In a lengthy resolution passed unanimously at the 1936 UBCJA national convention, the delegates expressed their satisfaction at the pro-union reforms instituted by the WPA but overall maintained a highly critical position. They wanted construction management decisions taken out of the hands of federal and state administrators, turning "this work over to our [sic] general contractors for supervision, contractors who are

FIG. 3. Construction of the Boston subway system under the Works Progress Administration programme (1938) (courtesy of the US National Archives).

equipped to do this work more efficiently". Should that plan fail, continued the delegates, "we ask that [WPA administrators] place on all future work, union skilled mechanics as foremen and supervisors to whom it rightfully belongs". The perspective embodied in this resolution cannot be attributed just to Hutcheson's fanatical voluntarism. At the 1938 Massachusetts AFL convention, all 42 building-trades delegates introduced a similar resolution. They charged that the WPA was competing with the 'normal' construction industry and, as a result, "seriously retarding recovery in that industry". They proposed that any project over $10,000 be put out for bids by private contractors rather than be administered by government agencies [25].

Rank-and-file carpenters rarely voiced a purely ideological opposition to public intervention. They shared their leaders' distrust of governmental intentions regarding wages and working conditions. But they also wanted to work and they knew, as Springfield Business Agent Harry Hogan told a 'somewhat startled' Central Labour Union meeting in 1939, that "carpenters can do better on the WPA than in private employment". They supported the New Deal's political programmes. For the rank-and-file carpenter, the controversial issues of relief and public works were more personal. The 90% rule had provoked intense hostility. The Administrative Order had tapped into something very deep inside those workers. Why else walk off a job when hardly any jobs are available?

Carpenters had constructed working lives based on an ethical system revolving around the twin issues of independence and cooperation. The independence, or self-reliance, served a crucial function. It helped fashion an unshakeable work identity that transcended any particular contractor or any particular project. The carpenter's

identity was based on his tools, his knowledge, and his own efforts. He stood alone, making a living by his wits, employed by others, but not defined by any single employer. Yet that independence was tempered by an equally strong sense of cooperation. The long and difficult battle to build and stabilise a union presence in construction had demonstrated the necessity of collective action to even the most individualistic of carpenters. Their very livelihoods, their pursuit of independence in their careers, ultimately depended on their ability to cooperate successfully in the form of trade unionism. Thus, Harry Hopkins' 90% rule was, in their minds, a slap in the face. They felt entitled to work, not to relief. Preferential treatment of those on relief told these carpenters that their values and choices would bring no rewards at the most stressful point in their working lives. It was a message from their government—their democratically elected representatives—that dependence and defeatism paid off.

They were, as one tradesman put it, 'self-sustaining' workers and their sense of self-respect depended heavily on that self-image. The Depression had wrought serious damage to that self-image. It was more than just a question of where the next meal would come from. Preoccupation with economic survival invariably triggered corollary concerns, such as family crisis, alcoholism, or emotional depression. Carpenters had sustained themselves through previous difficult periods with the help of their own culture of cooperation and independence—a culture peculiar to the building industry and nourished by its unions. The battles over relief and public works were clearly matters of bread and butter. But they were also symbolic struggles over the acceptance or rejection of the value of the carpenters' culture and his sense of self-worth. The reinstatement of the prevailing wage and the defeat of the WPA 90% rule brought union carpenters more and better-paid employment. Those rulings also validated a lifetime of personal choices. As a Boston labour reporter wrote, building trades workers "stressed that labour's dignity demands jobs be given in labour's own name without a thought of charity" [26].

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Appendix: The Massachusetts Carpenters History Project

The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America celebrated its one hundredth anniversary in 1981. As part of the centennial, two full accounts of the international union were published and a number of shorter histories of state councils and local unions were undertaken. The Massachusetts Carpenters History Project was set up in 1983. Like many of the other studies prompted by the centennial, the project proposed to chronicle the origin and subsequent development of the Carpenters Union in a particular region. Unlike most of the other efforts, however, the conception of the project transcended a simple focus on the institutional history of one craft union.

The Massachusetts Carpenters History Project was conceived of, directed by, and largely aimed at carpenters. We hoped to tell a well-rounded story of carpenters in Massachusetts, one that discussed the evolution of their trade, the growth of their union, and the changes in their daily working lives. In order to accomplish these goals, we adopted a historical method that has been termed social history, popular history, and bottom-up history. Regardless of the label, our approach simply attempted to couple conventional research techniques with in-depth interviews with the subjects of our history. In terms of content, we tried to place the articulated experiences and

impressions of working carpenters in the larger context of the political and social climate that they worked in.

The project's collection of nearly sixty oral histories of older and retired carpenters provide only limited illumination. There are inherent problems with this historiographical method, as with any other. Memories are often faulty or affected by the changing assumptions of intervening years. Each individual carpenter's views are just that—his or her views alone. They are occasionally inaccurate or subject to various interpretations. And ultimately, the story of Massachusetts' carpenters before the 1920s was beyond the reach of living memories. Information about events before World War I were, of necessity, derived exclusively from newspapers, magazines, official records, diaries, archival manuscripts, and other standard historical sources. Despite these limitations, the project's oral histories proved invaluable. We were able not only to document how working lives changed, but how those changes were perceived, i.e. how carpenters understood and remembered what happened as well as what in fact did happen.

One goal of the project was to accord a measure of dignity to a group of workers that usually has been either stereotyped or ignored. We believed this could be best accomplished through a scholarly, honest and, at times, critical portrait that neither romanticised nor falsified the historical record. We were also interested in breaking down the traditional barriers between observer and observed in the study of history. The people who conducted the work of the project reflected that desire, both in spirit and occupational experience.

The project director, Mark Erlich, has worked at the carpentry trade in the Boston area for 16 years. In addition, he has taught labour history to university and union audiences and has written extensively about the history of the American building trades and current labour issues. Erlich conceived and coordinated the project, and wrote the text of the book that emerged from the project. Dr David Goldberg of Cleveland State University served as Research Director. He has a broad background in Massachusetts labour history, with a particular focus on the state's textile workers. He developed the research strategy, conducted many of the interviews, and helped shape the analytic framework of the book. Robert Bryant, president of the Massachusetts State Council of Carpenters, and Andris Silins, general agent of the Boston District Council of Carpenters, provided access to union records and to lists of retired carpenters across the state. A number of other carpenters volunteered for various tasks, such as interviewing or photo research. And finally, labour historians David Montgomery of Yale University and James Green of the University of Massachusetts at Boston functioned as academic consultants.

This combination of historical expertise and insider familiarity with the trade provided great insight into the workings of an industry that has been relatively unexplored. Surprisingly little has been written about the history of work and/or labour relations in the building trades in the United States, despite the fact that construction employs four million workers and is one of the nation's largest production sectors. As a result, much of the work of the project broke new ground, not only in terms of its approach, but as part of a larger exploration of American labour history.

The fruits of the project, a book entitled *With Our Hands: the story of carpenters in Massachusetts,* was published by Temple University Press in early 1987. Popularly written and richly illustrated with photographs from the last century of construction in Massachusetts, the book has been widely reviewed in both academic journals and the mainstream media. The book has reached the hands of a large number of rank-and-file

carpenters through an unusual agreement, under which the publishers made copies available to carpenters at a very significant discount. The general attention granted to *With Our Hands* has been very gratifying, but perhaps the most gratifying responses have come from the many letters and telephone calls from carpenters. As one correspondent put it, "I didn't know we were so important".

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Abstracts of Periodical Literature

SIMON PEPPER

FREDERICK H. A. AALEN, **The Rehousing of Rural Labourers in Ireland under the Labourers (Ireland) Acts, 1883–1919,** *Journal of Historical Geography,* 12 no. 3 (1986), pp. 287–306. Under the Labourers (Ireland) Acts from 1883 to 1919 Irish rural local authorities demolished many of the primitive one-roomed 'cabins' in which agricultural labourers had traditionally lived and rehoused their occupants in solid, simple 'cottages' located along the roadsides. When the First World War halted building operations nearly 50,000 new dwellings had been built each with a small allotment. Conducted on a national scale and in rural areas this was the first major public housing enterprise in the British Isles. Numerous forces influenced the origin and evolution of the legislation, including the Irish Land Acts, 'constructive unionism', the decline of laissez-faire ideology and the back-to-the-land movement. The acts form a long, complex series during which early defects were corrected and financial resources enlarged. Building operations quickened after 1906 when substantial state finance was made available on attractive terms, but for various reasons building was always less in Connaught and Ulster than elsewhere. Features of traditional houses were sometimes deliberately perpetuated but cottage design and siting mainly reflect prevailing medical, sanitary, moral and financial concerns.

HUNAIN AL-QADDO & RICHARD RODGER, **The Implementation of Housing Policy: the Scottish Special Housing Association,** *Public Administration,* 65 (Autumn 1987), pp. 313–29. Extreme housing conditions in inter-war urban Scotland form the background to the creation of a specialist agency, the Scottish Special Housing Agency, charged with responsibility to relieve the housing situation and provide employment. The expansion of SSHA activities, which by 1980 made it the second largest housing authority in Scotland with 100,000 dwellings, is examined. The escalation of SSHA activities is considered in the light of inter-organisational relationships between the SSHA and the Scottish Office. The paper concludes that in the successive reformulations of housing policy the SSHA was not neutral, that it frequently anticipated policy reorientations, and was thus well placed to execute new policies once formally announced. Though it conformed to the broad outline of a 'mandated' agency with elements of power and resource dependency, the SSHA successfully established a degree of operational autonomy while simultaneously offering the Scottish Office a mechanism to contain the power of local government.

DIANA BALMORI, **George B. Post: the Process of Design and the New American Architectural Office (1868–1913),** *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians,* XLVI no. 4 (December 1987), pp. 342–55. This article deals with an American architect, George B. Post, and the organisation of his office. Post's practice was one of the earliest to be conducted as an office rather than an atelier. It was also the first large