

## Craft Labour and the Development of Trade Unionism among Building Tradesmen in Late Nineteenth Century New York

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### Introduction

In late nineteenth century industrial America craft workers steadfastly reaffirmed their worth as producers. Few craftsmen in this era expressed a greater sensitivity to the social significance of skilled work than building tradesmen. To carpenters, bricklayers and plumbers among others, performing "shoddy" work not only devalued their craft but threatened their fraternity of labour as well. *The Carpenter*, the official journal of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (UBCJ), feared that the "skilled mechanic" was either being replaced or transformed into a "hatchet and saw man". This development augured poorly for the cause of union labour, argued the journal, since it increased the ranks of "bats" in the trade, those who were "blind to their interests".<sup>1</sup>

These statements in *The Carpenter* suggest a number of questions concerning the relationship between craft labour and union activity, which for purposes of clarity can be arranged in two groups. First, what was there in the experience of craft labour that led *The Carpenter* to make an association between craftsmanship and trade unionism? What factors enabled skilled workers to organise and sustain trade unions, and what pressures prompted them to consider more closely the types of industrial action necessary to enforce the standards of their unions and crafts?

Secondly, what were the salient characteristics of the building tradesmen's strikes and boycotts? Were they essentially sectional conflicts in defence of customary prerogatives and material interests? Alternatively, did they constitute a broader and deeper expression of mutuality in the labour process and the trade union movement? Or did the industrial militancy merely suggest an instrumentalist version of labour solidarity in which mutual support served as a means of advancing sectional interests?

To address these questions this paper will examine the building tradesmen's world of work and the trade unions they forged in late Gilded Age New York. Likewise, the structural features of the industry will receive close attention. Of particular importance is an analysis of the building tradesmen's strikes so as to better appreciate the significance of labour activity among craftsmen during a period of accelerating economic change and greater employers' resolve to exert control at the workplace.

### The Building Industry In New York

Building tradesmen laboured in an industry filled with anomalies. Probably no other industry reflected more clearly the economic expansion and growth of cities during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. As the population of New York and Brooklyn (separate cities until consolidation in 1898) grew from 1.8 million in 1880 to 3.4 million in 1900, the construction of residential and non-residential buildings, as measured by the number of permits and their market value, rose steadily.<sup>2</sup> No other industry mirrored the health of the overall economy

more than the building trades. Few demonstrated the application of the principles of science more dramatically than the builders of suspension bridges and skyscrapers.

Yet few industries deviated more from the pattern of late nineteenth century industrialization. Firms, as indicated by the number of workers and capital reserves, were extremely small. Competition, despite the buffering impact of specialization, remained brisk. The industry was labour intensive, and highly dependent on the skills of the workers who mainly used hand tools and not machinery. Concomitantly, building tradesmen experienced autonomy in their work and claimed higher pay, shorter workdays and more job security than most manual workers.

Indicative of the vitality of both New York and Brooklyn was the intense pace of construction. One observer upon his walks through New York's frenetic streets noted:

*"Here was a four story structure, with a long sign of a bakery over the basement windows, one of those ancient dwellings which the churning process of the city has changed into a hive of little industries."*<sup>3</sup>

In Brooklyn, the rate of construction from 1886 to 1898 far exceeded that of the previous 12 years. For example, while the erection of new housing never exceeded 2,400 from 1874 to 1885, it approximated or surpassed 3,000 in every year from 1886 to 1893. Likewise, the construction of business and industrial facilities annually averaged 109 from 1874 to 1885, increasing to 158 between 1886 and 1897 (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup>

Even during the "bust" period following the Panic of 1893, construction of housing remained brisk. From 1890 to 1897 an average of 122 tenements were built yearly in Manhattan (a bor-

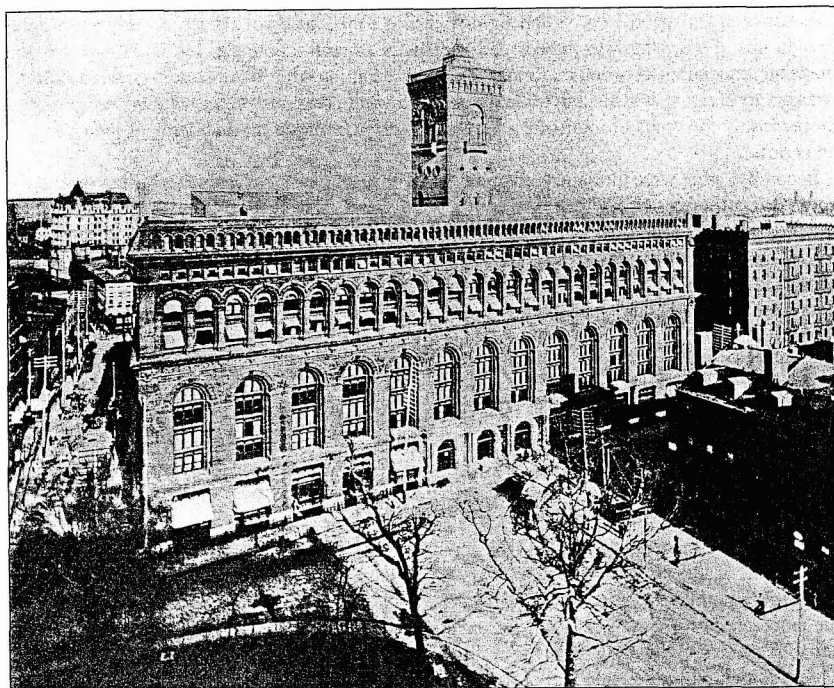


Fig. 1 The New York Produce Exchange (1881-4). The arched exterior conceals an ingenious use of iron frame construction above the exchange floor.

ough which claimed more than half of New York's population), and the number of tenements built in 1895 more than doubled that of any preceding year. In contrast, at the less modest end of the housing market, construction of single and double family houses declined steadily from a peak of 264 in 1892 to 71 in 1897.<sup>5</sup>

This emphasis on the construction of less expensive multiple family housing reflected a new pattern of land use - the maximization of vertical space. Refinements in the use of structural steel frames and beams, improvements in power-driven elevators, the development of better grades of cement, and the introduction of more elaborate architectural techniques permitted the erection of "elevator" buildings. The forerunners of the fully-developed skyscraper averaged 10-15 stories in height - with some like the American Surety Company headquarters (now Tokyo Bank) over 300 feet (Fig. 2) and the Pulitzer Building more than 20 stories and almost 400 feet tall.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1890s New York not only built upwards but expanded northwards as well. Exclusive clubs for the city's wealthier residents were established above 42nd Street and lavishly designed hotels bordering Central Park were erected. Further north, in Morningside Heights, the construction of St. John's Cathedral, St. Lukes' Hospital and Columbia Teachers' College and Columbia University Library epitomised New York's rapid and diversified development.<sup>7</sup>

During the late Gilded Age, when the building trades in New York and Brooklyn flourished, the dominant characteristics of the industry became more pronounced. Firms employing on the average (with the exception of those in masonry) fewer than ten workers were the norm.<sup>8</sup> Only two firms, the Jackson Architectural Iron Works and the Pelham Hoisting Company, commanded sufficient assets to warrant evaluation by R.G. Dun and Company, and both held capital reserves of less than \$100,000.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, the industry, within each trade, continued to be specialised. Contractors responsible for the carpentry work tended to specialise in the laying of floors, the building of stairs, or the installation of windows and doors. Likewise, masonry firms concentrated on the setting of foundations, the construction of chimneys, or the making of cornices.<sup>10</sup> This specialisation attenuated, to a certain extent, the intensity of competition suggested by the

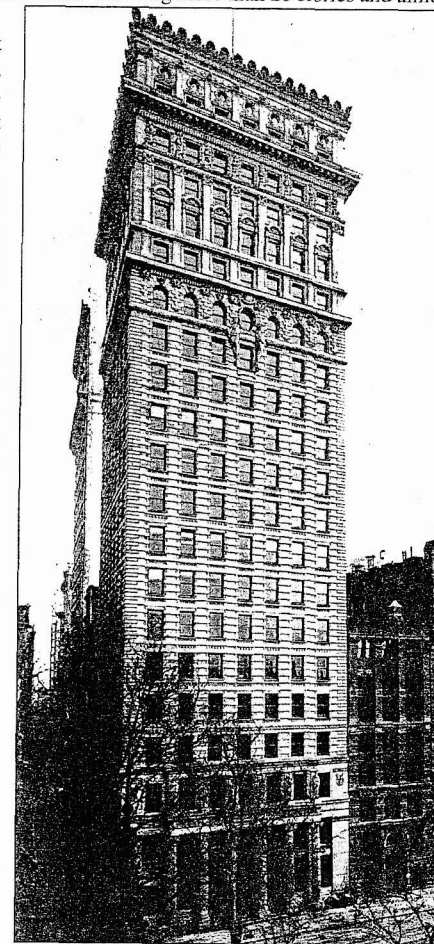


Fig. 2 American Surety Building (1895) (courtesy of Routledge)

number of firms, since few employers directly competed with each other unless they specialised in the same type of work. Specialisation, as well as low capital requirements, facilitated easy entry into the industry and inhibited any one or a handful of employers from capturing a dominant market position.

#### Employers' Initiatives: Sub-Contracting and Technological Innovation

Since technological innovation had not developed to the extent that machinery could be readily substituted for labour and thereby reduce per unit costs, employers pursued other strategies to meet the challenge of escalating wage bills. Instead, they sought to gain control over the hiring, firing and training of workers and to prevent building tradesmen from restricting output. When strong enough, employers tried to escape the reach of unions, and failing that, tried to circumvent union standards concerning pay, hours, apprentices and work rules. Employers' attempts to gain a measure of control over the workplace provoked strikes by buildings tradesmen, some of which involved members of other trades besides those who initially began the strike.

Towards these ends, employers in the 1870s and 1880s gradually developed a new means of allocating labour and organising production called sub-contracting. Sub-contracting worked as follows: a developer investing in the building of residential housing came to terms with a building contractor who agreed to complete the project with all its specifications in a given period of time and at a specific price. Contractors turned to middlemen, sometimes operators of a plumbing or carpentry firm, but usually outright agents of the contractor, to supply the labour within the cost stipulated by the contractor's agreement with his client. This system proved advantageous to employers because it lowered their financial risks, simplified the responsibilities of overseeing production and managing the workforce, and promoted the supply of skilled labour, trained and experienced in a specialised branch of the building trades.

Although production remained relatively unmechanised in the building industry compared to the boot and shoe, steel and textile industries, by the turn of the century, a number of technological innovations changed the nature of construction work. Iron and steel were increasingly being used at the expense of wood, and electric power was being deployed in ways that allowed for the erection of taller and larger buildings. In 1885, a technique developed by E.L. Ransome permitted the insertion of twisted steel bars to reinforce concrete so that the concrete used in foundations could withstand more tension. The invention of the pneumatic caisson also facilitated the laying of foundations. Using compressed air, it permitted the substitution of brick for concrete in the laying of foundations for piers and bridges.<sup>11</sup>

The application of motive-power also was important. Steam powered shovels and excavating machines expedited the clearing of ground, a prerequisite for all construction. Hod-hoisting machines and cranes first introduced in the 1890s allowed engineers to lift heavy iron and steel beams, bulky stones and all sorts of material used by building tradesmen.<sup>12</sup> These complemented the development of elevators which facilitated the construction of tall office buildings that dominated New York's skyline.

Other forms of technology were applied to specific types of work. Inventions such as the brick cleaner, paint spray gun and floor finishing machine simplified the tasks of building tradesmen and increased their productivity. Others, particularly in the carpentry trade, involved the use of highly adaptable saws to produce prefabricated doors, closets and windows.<sup>13</sup>

#### Craft Labour: Challenges and Opportunities

The impact of both sub-contracting and technological innovation on building tradesmen, however, was uneven. Plumbers, plasterers and bricklayers/masons apparently were not adversely affected by the growth of sub-contracting. "Respectable bosses" paid at rates conforming with union standards. Only among the masonry labourers was a concerned expressed about those who built for "speculators by paying as little as they can".<sup>14</sup> In contrast, carpenters and painters found their trade plagued by those who sought to recruit the cheapest available labour for contractors. Union carpenters in particular found this practice, commonly called "lumping" (because middlemen assumed the responsibility of fulfilling orders for carpentry and in turn sub-let the work), objectionable.<sup>15</sup>

The introduction of new equipment, construction methods and building material had mixed effects. Such innovations made the work of hod-hoisting engineers, responsible for the lifting of material, and structural iron workers and housesmiths, whose tasks included the building of architectural frames and arches, more critical in the production process. For carpenters, technological change, especially the introduction of machine produced prefabricated wooden parts, meant a decline in the need for all-purpose craftsmen and an increase in the demand for specialised workers such as millwrights, shinglers and ceiling workers.<sup>16</sup>

Although technological innovation did change how building tradesmen worked, it did not erode their status as craftsmen. They worked with hand tools that required the utmost training, experience and skill to master. As craftsmen they applied the principles of science and mechanics to construct buildings that were durable and sound. They demonstrated a practical knowledge of equipment and material, including knowing what tools and supplies to use in given situations, and how to improvise when parts and material were lacking. Their responsibilities demanded that they take exact measurements and perform their work with precision-like accuracy.

Even carpenters, whose craft had experienced mechanisation in certain phases, remained highly skilled workers. Outside, or on-site, carpenters still deployed hand tools to cut beams and pillars, construct roofs and carve ornamental mouldings. Some carpenters had developed the skills of craftsmen, capable of drawing detailed diagrams of elaborate roofs, columns, porches and fences.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, some building tradesmen, such as bricklayers, plasterers and painters, had the opportunity to display their artistic talents in the course of creating ornamental walls, ceilings, columns and cornices.

A highly skilled status, a strategic role in the production process and the limited scope of technological innovation fostered a craft autonomy, which in turn nurtured the self-esteem and confidence necessary for collective activity. Moreover, the shared work experience of building tradesmen promoted the formation of trade unions and facilitated broadly based industrial action.

Craft autonomy found expression as well in the organisation of production, which broadly speaking was "worker-directed". Carpenters and plumbers among others worked with little supervision. Supervision was not the responsibility of non-productive personnel, but instead of fellow craftsmen.<sup>18</sup> Bricklayers and painters occasionally doubled as workers and "managers", making decisions over labour requirements and work assignments. Even those craftsmen who did not assume supervisory roles were expected, as experienced practitioners of their trade, to complete their tasks without frequent instructions and persistent oversight. If problems arose, it was customary that craftsmen would first seek assistance from co-workers and not foremen.

Within construction work another feature of the production process promoted craft autonomy. Quality control or assessment of performance usually was contingent on the completion of the product, i.e. there was no mechanism allowing for frequent feedback. Shoddy work might not be discovered until another group of building tradesmen - whose ability to fulfill their responsibilities depended on the successful completion of work by another trade - began to work. Yet if plumbers' work was faulty, or if bricklayers laying a foundation "botched" the job, the damage might not be recognised until after the occupation of the building. For this reason, it was in the interests of contractors and sub-contractors to hire the most dependable and responsible building tradesmen and for craftsmen to maintain the strictest standards if they sought to influence the supply of labour. In fact, building tradesmen seeking to create viable unions exploited this aspect of construction work, convincing employers that union workers were the best in their trade and thereby helped to shape a craft labour market to their interests.<sup>19</sup>

The very sources of craft autonomy provided building tradesmen with leverage vis-a-vis their employers, and in turn made trade union membership more attractive since the benefits were immediate and tangible. Construction work placed a high premium on the labour of craftsmen whose knowledge and judgement could not be embodied in labour saving technology. Consequently, contractors and sub-contractors had reason to adjust to the presence of unions and attempt to establish amicable relations with them. Those failing to do so, or acting so bold as to oppose their standards on pay, hours and job security faced the immediate problem of locating an alternative source of labour.

Certain factors made the second option a risky endeavour. A dispute with one group of building tradesmen could trigger a general walkout among all the workers at a construction site. Secondly, building trades' employers had very flexible labour needs. These varied seasonally, according to the size of the project and the type of work. For example, the demand for labour was greater in the spring and summer. The number of workers needed in the construction of office buildings far surpassed that of single dwelling homes, and the need for decorative wall-papering or ornamental plastering was greater in a plush Fifth Avenue hotel than in a downtown tenement building. To fulfill their multiple and flexible labour needs, many contractors and sub-contractors turned to the unions' walking delegates (in essence business agents) who supplied the required number of workers if the employers agreed to hire only union members at union rates.<sup>20</sup>

### The Development of Trade Unions

Probably no city in the late Gilded Age had a more vigorous labour movement than New York. By the mid-1880s unions representing skilled workers such as printers, machinists, furniture workers, piano makers as well as building tradesmen had become firmly established. "Union fever" had caught hold among less skilled workers, such as freight handlers, hod-carriers, cloak-makers, and cigarmakers employed in tenement house production. In the spring of 1886 unions in the printing and building trades spearheaded a drive for the eight hour day, and in the autumn trade unions, bringing together craftsmen, factory operatives and labourers, launched Henry George's independent candidacy for mayor of New York. Such a flurry of bold initiatives led a leading employers' publication to foresee that "*being so elated at the idea of displacing the office holders that workers think that will have the right to go for the manufacturers*".<sup>21</sup> Standing at the crest of this activity was the Central Labor Union (CLU), a federation consisting of almost 150 unions representing over 100,000 workers. The CLU adjudicated jurisdictional disputes among constituent unions, mobilized support for strikes and boycotts and coordinated lobbying campaigns to enact reform legislation.

In late nineteenth century New York no occupational group showed the intimate relationship between the vitality of craft labour and trade union representation more directly than did building tradesmen. By 1890, affiliates of national unions, which only emerged in the previous decade, had made considerable inroads into the building industry. In the four major trades - carpentry, masonry, painting and plumbing - one in every four workers was a union member. Bricklayers constituted the most unionised (35%), and painters the least unionised (17%), while union density among carpenters and plumbers stood between these two extremes at 25%.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the development of trade unions was neither unilinear nor non-problematic. Economic slumps threatened the viability of unions and organizational rivalries hampered efforts to gain official recognition from employers. Four carpenter unions vied for influence and competed for membership in the early 1880s. The Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, formed in 1881, claimed only 5,800 members nationally at the end of 1885. Among its competitors the United Order of Carpenters, formed in 1872, appeared to make the most headway. By early 1886 it had organised ten lodges in New York and five in Brooklyn, with a combined membership of over 5,000. In Brooklyn the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters, consisting of Irish and British immigrants, many of whom had been members of the same union in their homelands, impeded the Brotherhood's progress. The Brotherhood also faced a challenge from the Progressive Carpenters which had established five local assemblies consisting of about 1,000 members by 1886.<sup>23</sup>

A series of measures, introduced in 1885 and 1886, re-energized the Brotherhood. These included the establishment of a strike fund as well as the provision of a members and wives' funeral benefit and a disability benefit that compensated for injuries incurred on the job. This set the stage for a merger between the United Order of Carpenters and the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners in 1887, and within three years the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (UBCJ) claimed more than 3,500 members.<sup>24</sup>

Bricklayers had been active in the trade union movement the longest of any of the construction crafts during the Gilded Age. Following the Civil War the New York and Brooklyn locals (branches) constituted the core of Bricklayers' International Union. However, as a consequence of the depression of 1873-77, membership had fallen to the extent that the union was on the verge of collapse. In the 1880s trade unionism among bricklayers recovered. In 1881 the union was reconstituted and two years later it expanded its base to include masons. Bricklayers soon became the highest paid building tradesmen in New York and Brooklyn and the first to achieve the nine hour day (1884) and then the eight hour day (1890). Union growth correspondingly was impressive. In 1885 the five locals in New York and Brooklyn had 3,000 members, and a year later on the eve of the drive for the eight hour day, membership stood at 4,000.<sup>25</sup>

In the early 1880s, the drive to organise plumbers fell under the auspices of the Knights of Labor, in contrast to the unions representing carpenters and bricklayers. After incurring a defeat in a strike for higher wages in 1881, union plumbers, the following year, reorganized themselves into local assemblies within District 49, joining gasfitters and steamfitters which had their own local assemblies. In search of greater autonomy and an effective organization, New York's and Brooklyn's plumbers led a drive to establish the National Association of Plumbers, Steam Fitters and Gas Fitters. The Knights' General Executive Board responded by forming National Trade Assembly 85, exclusively open to plumbers. In 1886, only two years after the birth of the National Association, most of the New York and Brooklyn locals, the bedrock of the young union, seceded to join the Knights as National Trade Assembly 85.<sup>26</sup>

The experience of carpenters, bricklayers and plumbers suggested trade unionism required the cultivation of certain values, principles and ideas that underpinned the intrinsic and instru-

mental rewards of cooperation and mutual support, as well as the introduction of measures that fostered the group discipline necessary for the effective labour activity. Union journals articulated a creed of camaraderie, reciprocity and individual responsibility that deepened the meaning of trade unionism for its participants. *The Carpenter* stressed these values in editorials, articles and advice columns. One selection entitled, "What Labor Men Say", told readers "not to backbite each other" and "to agitate with a view to the general enlightenment of the membership". A reprint from *The Painter*, published by the New York Painters' Union, identified the duties of a union "man". Among these were the obligation to attend meetings and discuss issues in a "friendly spirit", the responsibility to help fellow unemployed members find employment and the need to assist other building tradesmen organise unions.<sup>27</sup>

To Peter McGuire, the General Secretary of the UBCJ, the nurturing of trade union values represented a precondition for workers' "emancipation" from both material and intellectual deprivation (Fig. 3). By creating well-funded and well-administered benefit plans covering sickness, unemployment and funeral expenses, unions offered workers some protection against life's uncertainties and thereby helped them maintain an adequate standard of living. By helping members to develop new skills, such as public speaking and organising meetings, by encouraging the discussion of political, economic and social issues, and by founding libraries, unions could enrich the lives of workers and provide them with the inspiration and confidence to tackle the challenges facing labour.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, unions found that admonitions, words of advice and forceful appeals to shared values were in themselves insufficient. Consequently, building trades' unions established strict standards of conduct and enforced them vigorously. The UBCJ and the Bricklayers' and Masons' International Union maintained rules against drunkenness, slandering of officers, fraudulent claims for benefits and the misuse of funds. Bricklayers singled out the behaviour of "union wreckers" who "deliberately, and with evil intent", ignored the union's strike call and levied fines against the guilty parties. For their part, the Carpenters regarded strikebreaking as a grievous offence against the interests of the membership and treated offenders harshly with suspension or expulsion.<sup>29</sup>

Critical to the growth of the building trades' unions was the Board of Walking Delegates. Regardless of craft, size or whether they were affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) or the Knights of Labor, building trades' unions in New York held seats on the 30 strong Board of Walking Delegates, and sent delegates to the CLU where they played a prominent role. The Board adjudicated disputes between constituent unions and towards that end defined as its



Fig. 3 Peter J. McGuire, Founder and General Secretary of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners (courtesy of United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America.)

"property" any grievance brought to its consideration. This meant that no constituent union could seek resolution or redress outside the Board's auspices. Moreover, if two-thirds of the delegates gave their approval, the Board could authorise sympathy strikes or labour boycotts, and the Board's president could determine if participation in a sympathy strike was compulsory.<sup>30</sup>

Improvements in conditions of employment accompanied the growth in trade union membership. Between 1886 and 1894 wage rates steadily rose, and even during a depression that followed the Panic of 1893 they remained relatively stable. Wage rates among these unionised building tradesmen ranged from \$3.00 to \$3.50, with bricklayers, carpenters, painters, plasterers and plumbers from New York generally earning more than their Brooklyn counterparts. Almost without exception building tradesmen covered by a union contract had attained a nine hour workday by 1890, while some, including carpenters, framers, fresco painters, plasterers and plumbers had won an eight hour workday.<sup>31</sup>

Besides upgrading pay rates and shortening the workday, unions often succeeded in codifying rules into collective bargaining agreements with employers. The employers' acceptance of these rules reflected their acknowledgement of the building tradesmen's strategic role in the production process and their need for a reliable source of skilled labour uninterrupted by costly job actions. Unionised building tradesmen considered the rules significant because they promoted job security, regulated the supply of labour - thereby helping to maintain higher wage rates - and defended the integrity of their crafts.

Foremost among the rules were provisions establishing "closed shops", which required contractors and sub-contractors to hire exclusively members of a specified union, or, when closed shops proved unfeasible, as in the case of the housesmiths, the union obtained pledges to grant union members hiring preferences. Concomitantly, unions required their members not to work with any building tradesmen who had not joined a "bona fide" union, viz. those recognised by the Board of Walking Delegates. The Fresco Painters extended this rule even further, as it called on members to withdraw their labour if a co-worker had been fined or suspended by his union.<sup>32</sup>

Other rules aimed to define the terms of apprenticeships so that entry into the trade did not result in undermining the status of journeymen. These addressed eligibility requirements, the length of apprenticeships, the number of apprentices, and who was responsible for their training and work. Most unions required that new apprentices be no older than twenty-one. In principle unions felt they should help select apprentices, but in practice few did. The Journeyman Plumbers sought a veto power over the employers' choice of apprentices, but were rebuffed in a strike in 1886. Only locals of the Bricklayers' and Masons' Union had any authentic control over the selection process, as they reserved the majority of apprenticeships for members' sons. Even with the introduction of machine technology and the growth of specialisation in building trades work, unions maintained lengthy apprenticeships. The UBCJ set a four year period while the Bricklayers' and Masons' International Union and Amalgamated Society of Journeymen Plumbers established a five year apprenticeship.<sup>33</sup>

Building tradesmen, either through rules officially sanctioned by their unions or through practices made legitimate by the demands of their craft, exerted a measure of control over the work process. An elaborate agreement between the Operative Plasterers' Society and the Employing Plasterers' Society stipulated the number of coats required in different types of rooms and surfaces, the size of the work crews in relation to the amount of work, and the length of time expected to complete each phase - scratch coating, browning and hard finishing. Although not formalised into a contract, plumbers had attained *de facto* influence over their work pace and work methods. This autonomy emanated from two aspects of the plumbers' work experience. First, plumbers' responsibilities were intricate, and in many cases specifically

defined by the city's building codes that became more thorough in the 1880s and 1890s. The fitting of pipes, the connection of gas mains, and the testing of steam and gas equipment required methodical care. Second, plumbers had to demonstrate their competency to a Board of Examiners and thereby earned the necessary credentials of craftsmanship, a status that both employers and journeymen acknowledged.<sup>34</sup>

### Industrial Action: Trade Union Power and its Limits

The gains made by unionised building tradesmen did not go unchallenged. Non-union building tradesmen, even when union density was relatively high, remained a majority of the industry's workforce, and building contractors, in the face of growing union power, never ceased seeing ways to reduce production costs. Consequently, conflict continued to characterise industrial relations in the building trade, especially between 1890 and 1892, when numerous strikes erupted in defence of union standards. Disputes over union rates, especially over piece rate payments ("lumping") and the hiring of non-union labour, often sparked sympathy strikes that involved a cluster of crafts which were not original parties to the dispute.

Higher wages, shorter hours, job autonomy and regulated apprenticeships signified not only the privileged status of skilled labour. For many building tradesmen they were synonymous with union membership: the results of cooperation, group discipline and effective organisation. The ability to secure an exclusive recognition agreement and exclusive hiring for its members became a union's *raison d'être* and thereby a powerful incentive for building tradesmen to join. Moreover, since employment itself might depend on being a union member, the stakes of trade unionism were substantial. Building tradesmen, therefore, looked warily at employers' attempts to circumvent, if not violate, union standards.

In this context the vigilance and combativeness of building tradesmen were most sharply expressed in industrial action. Walking delegates did not hesitate calling on members to put down their tools to pressure contractors and sub-contractors to pay the union scale, observe overtime provisions and honour the closed shop. Between 1887 and 1894, 37% of the approximately 4,000 reported strikes in New York State occurred in New York's and Brooklyn's building trades industry. A significant proportion of these strikes were sympathy walkouts. Of the 1,450 strikes involving building tradesmen, 35% elicited the participation of workers who were not directly parties in the dispute, and from 1890 to 1892, these sympathy strikes peaked at 350.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, the building tradesmen's strikes enjoyed a high rate of success. From 1887 to 1894, 80% of the strikes in New York City's building trades ended with the strikers winning some, if not most, of their demands. During the same period, about two-thirds of all strikes in New York State and slightly more than a half of all strikes in the United States ended successfully for strikers. The rate of success of sympathy strikes in New York's building trades was comparably even more noteworthy, as 70% of these strikes were successful while less than half of the sympathy strikes in all industries throughout New York State experienced a similar outcome.<sup>36</sup> The successful record of New York's building tradesmen in their strikes was largely attributable to the extensive network of trade union organisation and collaboration, the vulnerability of the industry to job actions by a handful of workers which could rapidly expand to other crafts and the uneven development of employers' associations that could assist firms targeted for strikes.

Most of the building tradesmen's militancy was in defence of previously won gains, rather than making new inroads. Given the fact that most of the recorded strikes, especially those officially sanctioned by unions, aimed to reassert customary privileges and uphold contract

provisions formally accepted by employers, labour militancy served to discipline wayward contractors and sub-contractors and bring others into the industrial relations fold.

In this context, then, mutual support, in the form of sympathy strikes, represented a tactical exploitation of circumstances endemic to the interdependent system of production and inelastic market structure which simultaneously heightened the demand for reliable skilled labour, but permitted employers to pass on the costs of higher wage settlements to their customers.<sup>37</sup> A code of cooperation might have been cultivated by union rules, procedures, literature and participation in activities that stressed an identification to a cross-occupational labour movement. Yet it resonated with most meaning to unionised building tradesmen when striking members of one craft could count on the overt or tacit support of their cohorts in another craft.

In order to illustrate more clearly the dynamics of militancy and the evolving *modus vivendi* between unions and employers, it is necessary to examine some of the disputes that triggered sympathy strikes. These include the unsuccessful efforts of plumbers to strengthen the apprenticeship system and a jurisdictional conflict between the Housesmiths and Architectural Iron Workers, which threatened both to engulf the entire industry in walkouts, as well as the strides made by carpenters to curb lumping.

In 1886, when many building trades unions staged a concerted drive to gain a reduction in the workday, the plumbers launched a strike over the issue of apprenticeship regulations. The issue became urgent since the number of apprentices grew at so alarming a rate that in many plumbing firms they equalled the number of journeymen. William Flood, Recording Secretary of the Journeymen Plumbers, argued that if the growth rate of apprentices continued for another five years, an overabundance of plumbers would result, threatening the journeymen's job security and leaving a plumber "*unable to decently support a family on the pittance which he can only expect when supply and demand are so unevenly balanced*".<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, the union sought a greater role in the selection and evaluation of apprentices, hoping that entry into the trade could be more closely regulated and thereby restricted. The Master Plumbers' Association agreed with portions of the journeymen's apprenticeship guidelines, but they disagreed with the more critical aspects of the journeymen's regulations. They rejected the ratio of only one apprentice for every four journeymen, the journeymen's claim to veto the employers' nominees for apprenticeship and the union's right to sit on a board of examiners that evaluated apprentices after their five year training period as infringements on the employers' ability to run their businesses.<sup>39</sup>

In late August, when talks between the two groups failed to resolve these differences, the Journeymen Plumbers began the strike. Three months later, with no break in the impasse in sight, the Board of Walking Delegates endorsed sympathy strikes at some of New York's largest construction projects where "scab" plumbers were working. Yet despite the support of carpenters, steamfitters and masons, the plumbers failed to make much headway. By Christmas about half of the 1,000 strikers had returned to work without any tangible gains except the assurance that forfeiting their union membership would not be a condition of employment.<sup>40</sup> However, the plumbers' defeat after a protracted struggle did not result in irreparable damage to the union. In the next few years union plumbers regrouped, forming the largest locals in the United Association of Plumbers, and slowly began establishing closer relations with the Master Plumbers culminating in exclusive closed shop agreements.<sup>41</sup>

In the early 1890s the Housesmiths' Union figured prominently in two of the largest of sympathy strikes which characterised the labour activity of building tradesmen. The first of these disputes, in 1891, involved the building trades' unions against the Boss Roofers' Association and the Iron Manufacturers' Association. At issue was the Housesmiths' demand that the eight hour day be put into effect on May 1. The Iron Manufacturers' Association, consisting of 60

firms, argued that because regional competition was brisk they could not afford to reduce hours and maintain the same daily rate of pay. In addition, J.M. Cornell, one of the leaders of the Iron Manufacturers' Association, charged that the Housesmiths' Union demanded the firing of members of the Architectural Iron Workers' Union, an AFL affiliate. To the Housesmiths' Union these claims were a "subterfuge" for the employers' unwillingness to consider the "justice" of the eight hour demand.<sup>42</sup>

Accordingly, on April 30, 3,000 housesmiths walked off their jobs, interfering with work at a number of large construction projects in Manhattan, and the next day the strike swelled to 4,500 participants. Nevertheless, as the strike continued, support from other building tradesmen was not immediately forthcoming. The Board of Walking Delegates announced it would authorise a general walkout only if other firms besides the Jackson Architectural Iron Works hired non-union men. This caution stemmed from the rivalry between the Housesmiths' Union, affiliated with the Knights of Labor and the Architectural Iron Workers' Union, both of which were members of the Board, and reflected the balance of forces on the board where representatives from AFL affiliates sat alongside officials from affiliates of the Knights of Labor.<sup>43</sup>

Consequently, most of the building trades unions granted only limited support to the Housesmiths as sympathy strikes took place at only a few worksites. However, when it appeared that the union's survival, and the members' jobs, were at risk, the Board of Walking Delegates intervened to help the Housesmiths reach a settlement which stipulated that the employers would rehire all the strikers they could accommodate on the old terms, i.e. without an eight hour day. Those housesmiths unable to secure employment would be compensated through a strike fund augmented by contributions from member unions.<sup>44</sup>

The next year the Housesmiths were at the centre of an industry-wide dispute. What began as a job action at the Criminal Court Building in late May over the hiring of non-union men by the Jackson Architectural Iron Works became a showdown a month later between the Housesmiths, the Public Cartmen's Union and the Building Material Handlers' Union against the Iron League and the Building Material Dealers' Association. When the Jackson Architectural Iron Works refused to dismiss the non-union housesmiths, the Board of Walking Delegates threatened to call for strikes wherever Jackson's products were used.<sup>45</sup>

In large measure due to the employers' resolve, the sympathy strike in support of the Housesmiths lost momentum. Members of the UBCJ refused to honour the Housesmiths' picket lines, recalling that union's lack of support for the carpenters' strike against John Downey and Company earlier in the year. Instead, the focus of the strike shifted from the Jackson Architectural Iron Works and the Iron League to the Building Material Dealers' Association. Building and allied tradesmen, to the number of 1,500, including carpenters, framers and plasterers, among others, at more than 100 building sites joined the strike in support of the cartmen and building material handlers.<sup>46</sup>

As the strike wore on for two more months, the employers gained the upper hand. In early August a united front of building material dealers, brick dealers and building contractors began to recruit non-union replacements for striking cartmen and material handlers. By early August, sympathy strikers from the building trades unions returned to work in the hundreds, leaving the strike on the verge of collapse. Consequently, on August 9 the Board officially ordered an end to the strike, although no formal settlement had been signed with the employers. As a result, after six weeks virtually all of the striking housesmiths applied for reinstatement with their previous employers, deserting the union in the process.<sup>47</sup>

If the Housesmiths represented the weak link in the chain of mutual support, the carpenters were the most cohesive. For instance, in 1892, after John Downey disavowed an agreement, which required the payment of cabinetmakers doing the work of carpenters at the latter's wage

and hour scale, the Board of Walking Delegates authorised a sympathy strike and oversaw the picketing of the Hotel Waldorf and Hotel New Netherlands. Construction on the two hotels, as well as the Metropolitan Life Insurance Building and the Criminal Court Building, stopped. Consequently on March 3, less than two weeks after the strike began, John Downey and Company acceded to all of the carpenters' demands: that the cabinetmakers work at the carpenters' scale of \$3.50 for an eight hour day and non-union men be discharged.<sup>48</sup>

Two years later, the carpenters even more impressively flexed their muscles in industrial action when they mounted a coordinated campaign against the lumping system. In an unprecedented show of cooperation among the AFL-affiliated UBCJ, the independent Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and the Knights of Labor-affiliated Progressive Society of Carpenters, the three unions declared a joint strike. Faced with the disruption of work at 250 mid-Manhattan construction sites, eight of the largest contractors pledged to hire carpenters directly and to sever their ties with the sub-contractors. As scattered sympathy strikes by plasterers, steamfitters and elevator builders broke out in the Wall Street area, many more contractors settled on the unions' terms. By the end of the month, the carpenters' unions had secured agreements with virtually all of the contractors.<sup>49</sup>

The strikes during this period of intense industrial conflict illustrate both the vitality and constraints of the building tradesmen's labour activity. Strikers demonstrated a strong commitment to the principle of mutual support in recognition of the fact that the mobilisation of as many workers as possible at a worksite or within the industry increased the likelihood of success. A secret of the success of the building tradesmen's strikes was quick, timely and targeted action. Strikes by workers involved in key phases of construction, against individual employers at a few worksites, produced the intended results: a sudden halt to all work and a satisfactory settlement of the issues of contention.

In this scenario the building tradesmen held the advantage since contractors and sub-contractors could lose business to their competitors if work stoppages continued unabated. The 1892 strike against John Downey owed much of its success to the fact that carpenters were able to concentrate their forces against one employer and at a few worksites. In the 1891 and 1892 Housesmiths' strikes, however, the struck firms were leading members of an employers' association which aggressively sought alliances with other employers' associations in the industry to rebuff the strikers.

The building tradesmen's militancy, constraints notwithstanding, was significant in another respect. Strikes, either to secure additional gains or to enforce established standards, had proven to be costly to unions even when they were successful. Similarly the stakes for employers who refused to respect the position of unions were high. Therefore, it could be in the mutual interest of unions and employers to seek some accommodation.

Indicative of this shift in relations, which saw less use of strikes, union carpenters sought to convince the contractors of the wisdom of resolving problems amicably. From 1895 to 1898 New York's District Council of the UBCJ reached understandings with contractors and architects that excluded the use of non-union and out-of-town prefabricated wood products. Capping the union's success was a pact signed with the leaders of the General Contractors' Association, including Otto Eidletz and P.J. Walsh, and the Builders and Master Carpenters that required all employers to use only union made material.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

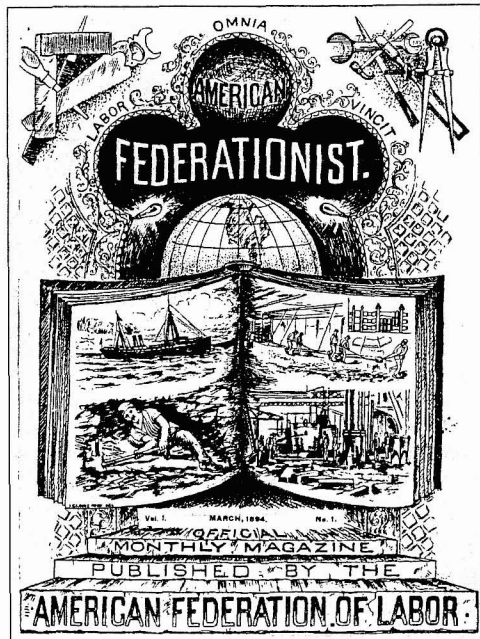


Fig. 4 Cover of the first issue of the *American Federationist*; published by the American Federation of Labor, March 1894 (courtesy of the University of Illinois Press).

and sub-contractors for a reliable source of specialised and skilled workers. Yet when necessary they seized the opportunities presented by their strategic position in the production process to engage in militant industrial action. Some of their more articulate leaders, such as Peter McGuire of the UBCJ, advanced an ethical code of trade unionism which stressed the mutuality of responsibility and solidarity of commitment. Emboldened by the links their unions forged through the Board of Walking Delegates, building tradesmen turned to mutual support, often in the form of sympathy strikes, to defend labour standards. In doing so they demonstrated that trade unionism represented not only collective activity in pursuit of material interests, but also a deeper and broader expression of the shared experience of craft labour.

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In short, union building tradesmen and employers appeared to have reached a *détente* (Fig. 4).

Where the 1890s began with a series of showdowns in large sympathy strikes, it closed with an informal pact acknowledging that each group was too strong to force the other to bend to its will. This balance of power would be redefined in the following decade when the building contractors waged a massive lockout that resulted in the introduction of an industry-wide arbitration plan which prohibited sympathy strikes.<sup>51</sup> Yet even the events of 1903 did little to erode the craft autonomy upon which much of the collective strength of the building tradesmen rested.

In late nineteenth century New York, nevertheless, the negotiation of comprehensive agreements between unions and employers remained intermittent. Instead, as building tradesmen sought to upgrade pay rates, promote job security and improve working conditions, they addressed the needs of contractors

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