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The Coming Crisis in the Carpenters Union



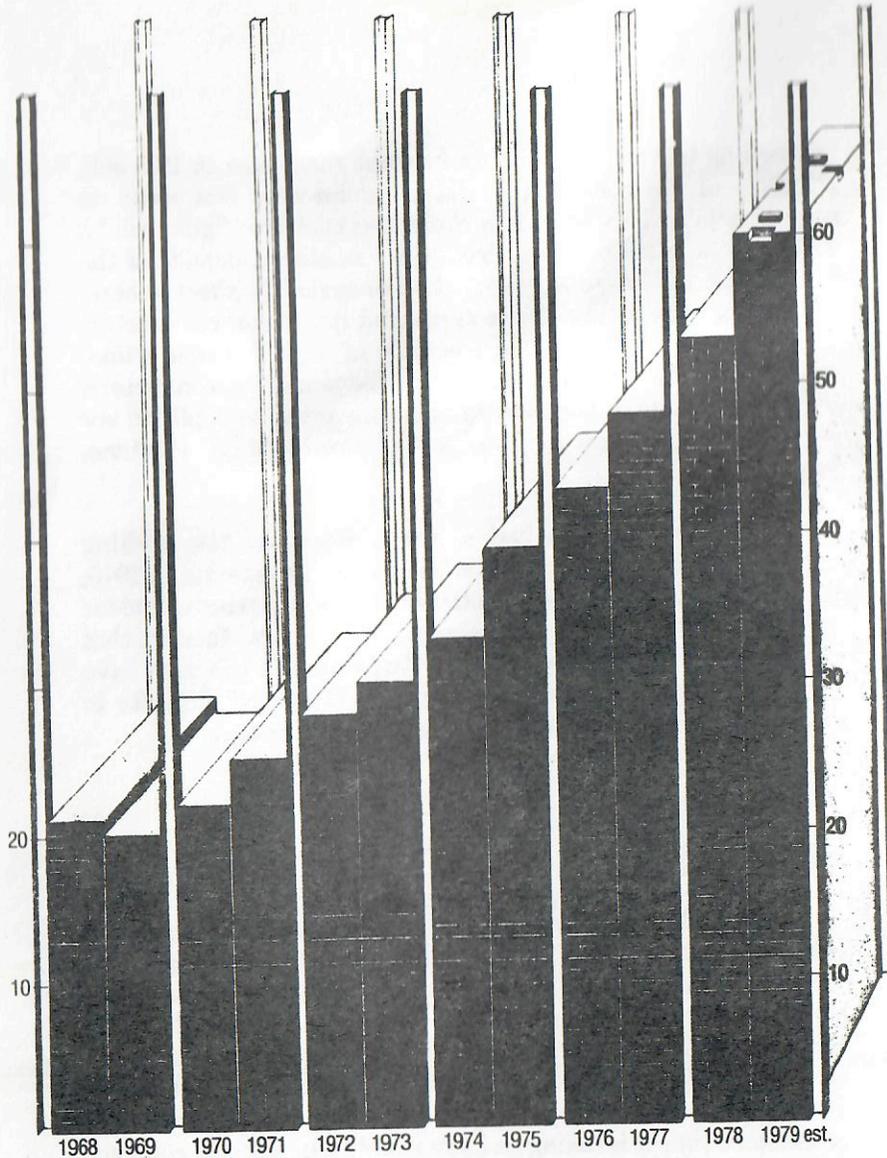
by John Reimann

The Coming Crisis in the Carpenters Union

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"There seems to be developing a form of class warfare in our continent. Business, management or capital, whichever you choose to call it... will not be happy until they achieve their new goal of a 'union free environment.' This is not a slogan nor an idle threat... it is their goal... to destroy the labor movement and all that it stands for... The only thing that stands between them and the complete domination of our political institutions and the workers of America is us, the trade union movement."
William Sidell, former General President
at the 33rd General Convention of the United Brotherhood
of Carpenters and Joiners of America.



Volume of the non-union construction business has tripled: Non-union contractors are now taking an estimated 60% of the construction dollar, and most of this growth has been in commercial, industrial and the like, where the dollar volume has swelled from about \$5 billion in 1968 to \$71 billion in 1979.

THE POLITICAL ARENA

Naturally, this has its counterpart in the political arena: In the first place, organized labor has been unable to accomplish one single aspect of its legislative goals since Jimmy Carter was elected along with one of the most heavily Democratic congresses in history. The list of failures includes situs picketing, labor law reform, maintenance of price controls on natural gas and oil, and a meaningful anti-unemployment act (the "Humphrey-Hawkins" Act). We have further been faced with a massive sabotage of OSHA as well as continual new anti-labor rulings from the courts and other governmental agencies.

Finally, of course, the politicians of both parties simply refuse to even begin to address the basic social problems which American workers face (inflation, unemployment, and a growing energy crisis whose real dimensions we haven't really begun to see yet.)

OUR UNION'S POLICIES

Unfortunately, our union leadership has proven itself unable to effectively deal with this situation, as the decline in both our total membership as well as the per cent of the work we control indicate. In a book-sized document published by our International office and entitled "Leadership Conferences (United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America) 1977", General President Sidell writes of the necessity to keep the unionized contractor "competitive" with the non-union contractor and concludes by saying, to the business agents and the like: "Some of the decisions you will have to make will be hard ones. Some of the steps you will have to take will not be popular, but they will be necessary..."

At the 1978 California State Council of Carpenters convention, President Sidell called on us to "take the garbage out of your contracts." Add to that the type of contract the International is pushing (with pay cuts, longer work weeks, increased ratios of apprentices to journeymen, partial surrendering of jurisdictional rights) and one should see what sort of "garbage" Sidell means.

CONTRACT ENFORCEMENT

Contract enforcement is the other side of the same coin. A great many carpenters today complain about how rarely they see their business agents out on the job, how hard it is to get them to vigorously enforce the contract and give them the protection they need. Often, the members see it as a matter of the b.a.'s simply being lazy or the like. While this may be part of the problem for some b.a.'s, the core of the matter is that most business agents are simply carrying out the policy of our International (keep the contractors happy).

This goes along with an apparent attempt to help cut back on wages and working conditions to appease the contractors and help make them "competitive". If the facts cited above aren't enough, simple logic should show that this strategy can't work: Each cutback that the union carpenter suffers can be matched (and then some) by the non-union contractor. As the non-union contractor cuts back further, more of the same is required of the unionized workers.

This is what many carpenters call "cut-throat competition" and a recent issue of **The Journeyman** (published by the Alameda County Building Trades Council) quoted the Associated Builders and Constructors (ABC, that known, openly union-busting outfit) as saying it was "delighted" with how that policy was being carried out in Washington, D.C.!

DEMORALIZATION

This does have an effect within the membership: demoralization. As members repeatedly find out how extremely difficult it is to get their business representatives to go to bat for them, they start to become disgusted with the entire union. Lacking any sort of job protection, even the most union-minded tend to keep their mouth closed on the job when the union is bad-mouthed and the boss runs roughshod over those who allow it. If conditions are bad enough, if the job is unsafe enough, then some may quit to find another job, but few are encouraged to stay and fight.

The average carpenter, then, feeling that he or she will get little or no protection from the officials, turns to the only other power around: the contractor. "If the union won't help, then at least you can try to get in good with the contractor and get a steady job." This is the thinking of many, as brought about by the policies described above.

It must be emphasized that **the problem starts at the top**. It is all too fashionable nowadays for our officials to blame the membership for the sorry shape our union is in. They say the members lack fight, that they don't care any more, that they'd rather stay home and watch t.v., but when the member feels that he or she will be victimized any time they show some fight, what else can be expected?

The fight hundreds of members in the Bay Area put up in the winter of 1973-74 to defeat Nixon's wage controls proves that the spirit is not gone. The only question is: how to mobilize the members and around what issues?

1980 CONTRACT

With relatively full employment in construction right now, we are in a strong position. The Northern California Carpenters' contract will expire on June 16 of 1980. As negotiations open, the AGC is threatening to demand that an "open shop" clause be inserted in the contract, and dozens of contractors are sending in decertification letters. This makes a strike almost certain, be we shouldn't be fooled into thinking it can only be a strike to protect our union; the relative full employment puts us in a strong position to win the best contract in the history of the Brotherhood. We need:

*A big wage increase to make up for past increases eaten up by inflation (over \$2.50 per hour in the first year) coupled with a **full, uncapped, quarterly**, (and all this is critical) cost of living allowance (COLA) for all working and retired carpenters, coupled with a \$60.00 across-the-board increase for all retirees.

*Job protection through a strong one-site seniority system to eliminate the revolving door hiring system, unfair discharges, and speed-up.

*Two ten-minute, paid coffee breaks daily.

*A shorter work week.

*Elimination of the no-strike clause to allow full, effective, immediate contract enforcement.

Such a contract will not only help protect us from spiralling inflation, but also protect members from the increased harassment and speed-up that always comes with higher rates of unemployment (rates which we all expect in the future).

A full-scale strike can only be effective if it is enthusiastically fought for by the membership (which will not happen unless they feel that there are going to be some improvements that they are fighting for also). The leadership should fully commit itself to winning the above gains and then carry this program to the membership. Send the business agents out into the field to let the members know that we are going to fight for what we need this coming summer! Have them distribute circulars and leaflets describing what we will be going for. Call mass rallies to make this commitment clear and build a fighting spirit within the ranks. Organize strike committees and flying squads in every local and every area to make sure our strike is 100% effective. Commit ourselves in advance to a policy of "no contract, no work" with the clear understanding that there will be no interim agreements (which are only the first step towards giving up on our demands). Seek ties in the rest of the labor movement in case the AGC tries to organize scabbing or use the courts to break us.

And when the dust settles and we have won our demands, then use the movement we have built to wipe out the open-shop-pers and union busters in our area and set an example for the rest of the labor movement throughout the nation.

POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE

In his August 30, 1979 Labor Day Message, John Henning, Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the California Labor Federation, AFL-CIO, stated:

There are signs American labor may be entering a decade of historic political change as the 1980's approach with their possibilities for national progress or decline. Labor's dilemma is clear enough: the two party system is no longer serving the economic and social interests of the American working people. Indeed, the two parties appear simply one institution, with Democratic and Republican departments alike financed by the corporate community...

Realizing there is no present alternative to the one-party structure, Labor must consider the advantages of a separate political party.

Labor parties have long led the way to progressive law in such democracies of the western tradition as Britain, Norway, Australia, and New Zealand. They have assured unions of bargaining freedom and written inspiring history in such areas as health, medical care and housing. They are free of corporate giving and thus of corporate control.

American labor in the coming year should, through its vehicles of education, study and measure the Labor Party experiences of the democratic nations. Our blind acceptance of external political authority finds us beggars at the table of national abundance. We deserve better than that.

It is not entirely clear whether Brother Henning intends concrete action by this statement, or if he is just trying to scare the Democrats a little bit. In any case, the statement is welcome, if somewhat overdue. Already my local, Carpenters Local 36, has endorsed it and is calling on Brother Henning to take the next logical step and call for an emergency convention of all labor to discuss how such an **independent labor party** could be organized, what its program would be, and who it will put up for candidates.

NATIONAL POLITICS

Nationally, William Winpisinger, President of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), is now leading the call to nominate Ted Kennedy for President. Yet Winpisinger has not given one single clear reason why Kennedy will be any better than Carter has been. Union members should remember that it was Kennedy who sponsored the Criminal Code "Reform" Act of 1978 (which would have been one of the most repressive, anti-labor laws in many decades had it passed the House). We should be aware that it is Kennedy who is now leading the drive to deregulate the trucking industry and thereby break up the Teamsters Union. We should be aware that Kennedy has now given up on his call for nationalized health care. And we should not forget that he has failed to speak up in any concrete manner on any of the basic problems which face American workers: inflation, unemployment, and the energy crisis.

These facts, coupled with the increasing tendency of Democratic liberals to seek to cut our throats once they get into office (e.g., California's Gerry Brown), should be enough to convince anybody that Ted Kennedy is not the answer for labor.



The Two-Gate System. Here, the contractor has set up two entrance gates for employees, one for unionized contractors and one for the non-union contractor (QSP). Pickets are only legal at the non-union gate, making it hard to keep the union workers off the job. Mass picketing and independent political action are needed to beat this problem.

WINPISINGER FOR PRESIDENT

On the other hand, William Winpisinger himself is a nationally known labor leader who has taken a progressive stand on many public issues, including energy (where he favors replacing the billion dollar monster of nuclear energy with solar and other safe, cheap sources). He has been outspoken in calling Carter "that little fink in the White House," and labelling former Department of Energy chief Schlesinger as having "a nazi mentality". While Winpisinger may not fully speak to the needs of American workers, it is clear that he is far and away better than anything the Democrats would ever consider putting up.

A labor party in California should call on Winpisinger to affiliate with it, drop his support for Kennedy, and run for president himself. Such a step would make the labor party a national force and would push millions of union members and others into action. It would be a tremendous, historic development for American labor.

It is also entirely necessary to move in this direction if our unions are to survive in the coming decade.

A LABOR PROGRAM

At this point it appears that there may be a serious move towards a labor party in the near future. The first step it should take is to establish a clear program and insist that all candidates it puts forward fully commit themselves to that program, with the understanding that they will be removed from office should they fail. An independent labor program should include points on:

Union busting: effectively outlaw the runaway shop and strike-breaking.

Inflation: drastic cuts in the military budget; recall of all overseas troops, with the money to go towards rebuilding our inner cities and the solution of other outstanding social problems.

Unemployment: government built housing, construction of rapid transit systems in all urban areas, and a guaranteed job for all at union pay scales and under union working conditions.

Energy: Immediate phase-out of nuclear energy (whose wastes may well be the greatest danger the human race has ever faced), to be replaced with such truly clean, safe, cheap sources as solar power, biomass, the winds and tides, garbage, etc. Get people out of the car and into efficient, free rapid transit systems.

While this is only a partial list, I think it begins to show (in the words of John Henning several years ago) "labor can put to right what is wrong with America."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

1980 Contract Members should not be tricked into thinking that the 1980 contract must revolve around only the issue of union-busting. The only way to effectively fight union busting is to put up a fight for the improvements we need. Carpenters should raise the demands mentioned in this pamphlet and seek endorsement in their locals for them (as Local 36 has already done). They should seek to instruct their delegates to the 46 County Conference Board to support action along these lines, as well as to communicate with other active members on this

question. Independent forces must unite and work together to insist that a democratic, militant strike strategy is put into effect and that our union goes for the best contract possible this June.

Political Action We should bear this in mind: Our fight for a good contract will also involve having to fight the courts and the like. This, in addition to the pressing social problems, is why we must work for an independent mass labor party. Carpenters and all union members should contact Local 36 (8460 Enterprise Way, Oakland, California) for copies of the position we have taken on a labor party, and should seek endorsement from their local. Locals should be instructed to inform both Local 36 and John Henning of any action taken in this regard. This goal may seem beyond our reach to some, but we should bear in mind that John Henning, Tony Ramos (of the California State Council of Carpenters) and James Lee (of the California State Building Trades Council) have a tremendous power in their hands if they care to use it; and they can be brought to do so with enough pressure from our locals, district councils, building trades councils, and individual members.

OFFICIAL SANCTION NEEDED

Where members have officials who simply refuse to even cooperate, there are still things that can be done without them. However, it is also important to realize that in the long run, we **must have** the official sanction of our union to back us up with its full strength. Continually trying to ignore that, and simply trying to get **around** the union leadership is a dead end. If that could be really done successfully, then we wouldn't need the union in the first place. Those officials who prove themselves unable or unwilling to lead such a movement should be replaced by people who will.

This must be pointed out because active members sometimes grow tired of dealing with officials who seem unaffected by pressure. In fact, these officials are usually extremely disturbed by accurate criticism, because **they** know how effective it will be in the long run. Acting on our own is fine, where it is possible to really **accomplish** something, but it is no substitute for union sponsored action.

The task ahead of us is a big one, and the time to get started is **now**.

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