Who Will Build the Future?

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Abstract

[Excerpt] The construction unions' crisis both preceded and contributed to the general decline of organized labor. At the time "concessions" became a household word in manufacturing, building trades workers had already endured five years of wage freezes and cuts. Just as construction unions helped set standards in the past for wages, hours and political muscle for the entire labor movement, the rise of the open shop in construction was the opening salvo of an all-out assault on the house of labor in the 1970s and '80s.

Since World War II, building trades unions generally marched to their own tune, cementing their power locally and nationally, and often appearing indifferent to the fate of other sectors of the workforce. But their current crisis has evaporated the reigning sense of complacency and has forced union leaders to reconsider adopting the traditions of militancy and activism that built their organizations a hundred years ago. Drawing on some of the recent innovations throughout the labor movement, building trades unions are currently more receptive to new initiatives than at any time in the past 50 years.

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