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Bosses Hit Jobs, Wages, Conditions

HOW WILL OFF ARE WE?

Black and White Construction Workers

Another 21,000 in five years, according to the definition of the Labor Department. Taking all trades in the whole country, union construction workers gained an average of 26.3% a year ago.

Divided by the Bosses

WHAT ABOUT CONDITIONS ON THE JOB? Every man knows that as far as the boss is concerned there is no such thing as a free lunch. And he works hard enough to get it. And he often gets it. The upper class is a nice cozy life. Even though the boss is a capitalist, he is a capitalist in the most dangerous industry in the country. Even though he has a lot of money, he is a capitalist in the most dangerous industry in the country. Even though he has a lot of money, he is a capitalist in the most dangerous industry in the country. Even though he has a lot of money, he is a capitalist in the most dangerous industry in the country.

This article is reprinted from the February 1970 issue of PL, the national bi-monthly magazine of the Progressive Labor Party. Copies of PL are available from: Box 808, Brooklyn, N.Y. 11201.

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HOW WELL OFF ARE WE?

Most union construction workers average between 1,400 to 1,600 hours of work a year. That means a carpenter in New York earns a big \$8,960 a year. If he has two kids he needs another \$1,100 to live decently, according to the definition of the Labor Department.

Taking all trades in the whole country, union construction workers earned an average of \$6,305 a year ago.

WHAT ABOUT CONDITIONS ON THE JOB

Every man knows that as far as the boss is concerned there is no risk too risky, no man who works fast enough. And all too often the steward and the super have a nice cozy arrangement. The result is that construction is the most dangerous industry in the country. Even miners have fewer accidents, injuries and on-the-job deaths.

A year ago—a normal year—there were a quarter of a million on-the-job disabling injuries in the trades. And they resulted in 2,800 deaths in the year—nearly a fifth of all job-caused deaths in the country.

Accidents caused by the bosses demanding more and more work per day and the union not enforcing safety rules caused a time loss more than five times the amount of time lost because of strikes!

The pay may not be the highest but the conditions sure are the worst.

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CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

PLP Trade Union Section Flyer, 1969

Construction workers: Our jobs, wages and working conditions are threatened by Big Business. But racist ideas and racist acts by some of the men, rotten unions and corrupt union leaders are making it impossible for us to protect ourselves. Big Business has come up with a clever plan to get rid of the union scale and the union conditions now prevalent in the construction industry. They are also planning to get rid of hundreds of thousands of construction workers in the bargain. As things stand now the bosses can't lose. They are aided by men within our own ranks.

In these pages we will offer suggestions about what needs to be done by all construction workers who really care about their families and who are ready to learn the lessons of past experience.

Remember this: The construction companies are united against the men, and money-hungry. That make for a tough, ruthless enemy. We, on the other hand, are split—split black against white, union against non-union, and split by trades. As long as the workers are divided we can't win. That is the main lesson history teaches.

BIG BUSINESS is unhappy. Its profits aren't going up fast enough. In 1966 Big Business made twice as much profit as it did in 1961 (a sweet \$100-billion). But since then the rate of increase has been less, though profits are still going up.

The top 500 companies that control the country have figured out that they haven't been making as much as they would like to because wages are too high. Their first idea was simple: Charge more for everything. So they began inflating prices at the beginning of 1966. The result was that though the average worker increased his pay 21 per cent in the last five years, business made prices so high that we can't buy as much today with our "bigger" paychecks as we could five years ago with a smaller check.

But the inflation on top of the Vietnam war produced results the business men didn't expect:

Prices got so high that people wouldn't buy; banks wouldn't give loans except at very high interest; and so companies couldn't stay in business. The cure was worse than the disease. Big Business needed another way to keep real wages down. And here is where the construction workers come in.

Big Business decided that the high hourly wages of construction workers cause all other workers to demand higher wages. So all that needs to be done is to keep construction workers from getting raises, and even, if possible, knock down the wages that are now being paid.

In other words, the attack on construction workers is just a new front in a general war against the wages and living standards of all American workers. But it is the main battleground just now. The two million unionized construction workers are not fighting only for themselves. The hopes of 79 million other American workers rest with them.

Big Business's Plan

Big Business tackled matters with military precision. First it set up a supreme command. The National Association of Manufacturers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and a group of top corporations set up the command group. The chief is Roger Blough, former head of U.S. Steel. Other executives in the group represent General Electric, Standard Oil and General Motors, to name just a few (who happen to be the four top Big Businesses in the country).

The Big Business Supreme Command came up with the following strategy:

1. Get rid of the union hiring hall so low-paid non-union labor can be hired on all new construction.

2. Flood the industry with workers so we will fight each other for jobs and will agree to work below scale and without fringe benefits.

3. Allow the unlimited introduction of new techniques and methods to replace high-wage skilled workers with low-wage workers.

4. Have the Government institute forced arbitration, crushing the workers' right to strike, to defend themselves.

The battle plan for the strategy is based on splitting the workers up, on getting us to fight each other, or for each one just to look out for himself. The aim is to get one group of workers to think its enemy is another group of workers and not the companies or the corrupt union officials.

- Pit white workers against black workers by whipping up racist ideas among the white workers and then telling them their jobs are threatened by black workers.

- Maintain discrimination in the industry by admitting blacks mainly to jobs in a newly-created prefabrication section of the industry—a section with wages way below current scales. This will pit the black workers against the white workers.

- Do away with local bargaining and bargain only regionally starting in 1972. Make the regional bargaining units so large that workers will not be able to find alternate work in the event of a regional strike or lockout unless they move.

- Change the union pension and welfare plans so that the men will keep their benefits no matter where in the country they work. This will make it more attractive for men to move from their homes to chase after work, and so weaken the local unions. If the men move out of their area looking for work, they will not be able to have any say in the union. Without any rank-and-file participation, a handful of crooks, bought off by the companies, will be able to keep the union under the control of the bosses.

- Have the biggest corporations form their own non-union construction companies.

- Repeal the Federal law that ties wages and hours on Federal projects to provisions in union contracts. Insist on non-union hiring on Federal projects. (These projects are one third of all construction.)

This is a clever plan that takes into account all the old weaknesses and disunity of the construction workers. If the workers are going to win we will have to overcome these old hangups, the most serious of which is racism.

Racism is the Boss's Idea

Of all the divisions among workers the most serious, because it weakens the workers the most, is the division between white and black workers. Every struggle against the bosses in just about every industry throughout the history of America proves that the bosses have always relied on pitting white worker against black worker. In situations where white workers have not united with black workers, they have never been able to beat the company—not even for a nickle raise. Knowing this, the companies do everything in their power to keep the workers split by race. They rely on racism to do this.

The great tragedy in the construction industry is that here the bosses have been somewhat suc-

cessful. We all know that on every job there is a small group, usually company men or men from the union clique, who are open, vocal racists. They try to keep up a racist atmosphere with constant anti-black remarks or jokes. For good measure they will throw in anti-Irish or anti-Italian or anti-Jewish or anti-Swedish remarks and jokes. "All in good fun," but really all to keep each group split off and mistrustful of the others. Everyone knows that foremen will assign easier jobs and overtime first to "their own kind," also to keep the workers split racially and nationally. In many locals the business agent will favor one group over all others in job assignments. In this way men are taught never to trust their fellow workers because they are Italian or Jewish or Scandinavian or Irish or whatever and so are given favors by this foreman or that steward or business agent. It's a nifty method for keeping the workers from effectively fighting the boss.

Racism is bad for more reasons than the fact that it takes money out of workers' pockets. It is just a set of wrong ideas and sub-human ideals. In



Phila. blacks demonstrate for more construction jobs

our country today black workers get the lousy end of the stick every time. Their pay is low so their living conditions are low. The jobs open to them are restricted. Naturally these workers are rebelling against these conditions. They are right to rebel. They should be supported. That would help working people everywhere to live with greater dignity. Why should any working man begrudge other workers the right to a better life?

The most serious split is between blacks and whites. The bosses have their money on this one. And part of the workers are going along with them. Either these men are company stooges or they are just plain racists and don't care that only the boss benefits from their racism. After all, there were German workers who were Nazis and supported Hitler in his efforts to conquer the world for Ger-

man Big Business. A lot of workers died because of their racism, including most of the racist German workers (who were so reliable they were sent to the most dangerous parts of the front). If racist construction workers want to go that route that is bad. But most of the men can wake up to the danger of racism, and will fight it. And most workers throughout the country will fight racists.

Anti-black attitudes and racist demonstrations are dead-ends as far as the needs and interests of white construction workers are concerned. They are all company-inspired and benefit only the bosses. Today we hear two main racist arguments:

- "If they want to get into the union let them serve the apprenticeship and take the test like I did..."

Big Business couldn't hope for anything better than to have white construction workers try to keep black construction workers out of the unions. And every time you hear someone say the above, that is just what is happening. This is racism and it will hurt white workers just as much as black workers, and in some cases more.

Look at it this way: There are about six million construction workers in America. Only about two million are in the building trades unions. In other words for every union man there are two non-union men already doing the same kind of work for a non-union outfit. A lot of these guys are black, who have been frozen out of the unions and union jobs.

Up to now these non-union outfits have been kept off most Government jobs and off a lot of the bigger jobs. But most construction work is non-union. Nearly all renovations and most homebuilding is non-union. And now under the impact of the Big Business offensive against the building trades workers, these non-union outfits can no longer be kept off these jobs. Especially since the Government is going along in the service of Big Business.

Non-union workers are earning less than half of scale. As long as they are kept out of the unions they will keep on earning less than half of scale. If the boss can get a qualified man below scale, why should he pay scale? That is just what is already happening.

In his own interest every white construction worker should insist that his union go out and organize every non-union worker. And for the same reason, every young man who wants to come into the trades should come in through the union.

Moreover, it just is not true that most white construction workers served an apprenticeship. Most never even entered any training program at all. And more than half of those who did start apprenticeship training dropped out by the second year. But they became journeymen anyway. The truth is that most journeymen in most trades learned the trade on the job. So it is crystal clear that this argument is just sophisticated racism.

- "Well, if all these black workers come in, won't that mean money out of my pocket, jobs I

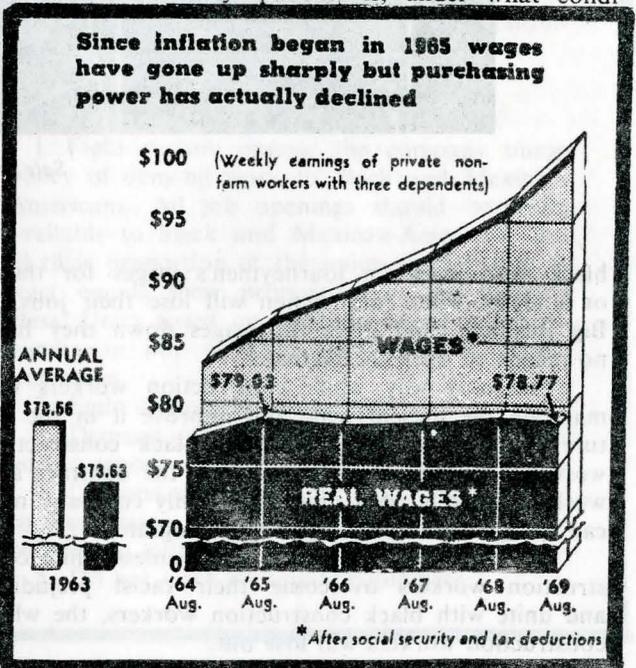
won't be able to get because they'll get them?"

No, it won't mean that at all. It will mean the opposite. It is the only way you will be able to work at a decent wage.

The whole Big Business scheme is based on the fact that there is a lot of non-union labor around that can replace union labor. Well, the only way to outmaneuver them is to make all that non-union labor into union labor. That way they won't be able to play off one group of workers against another.

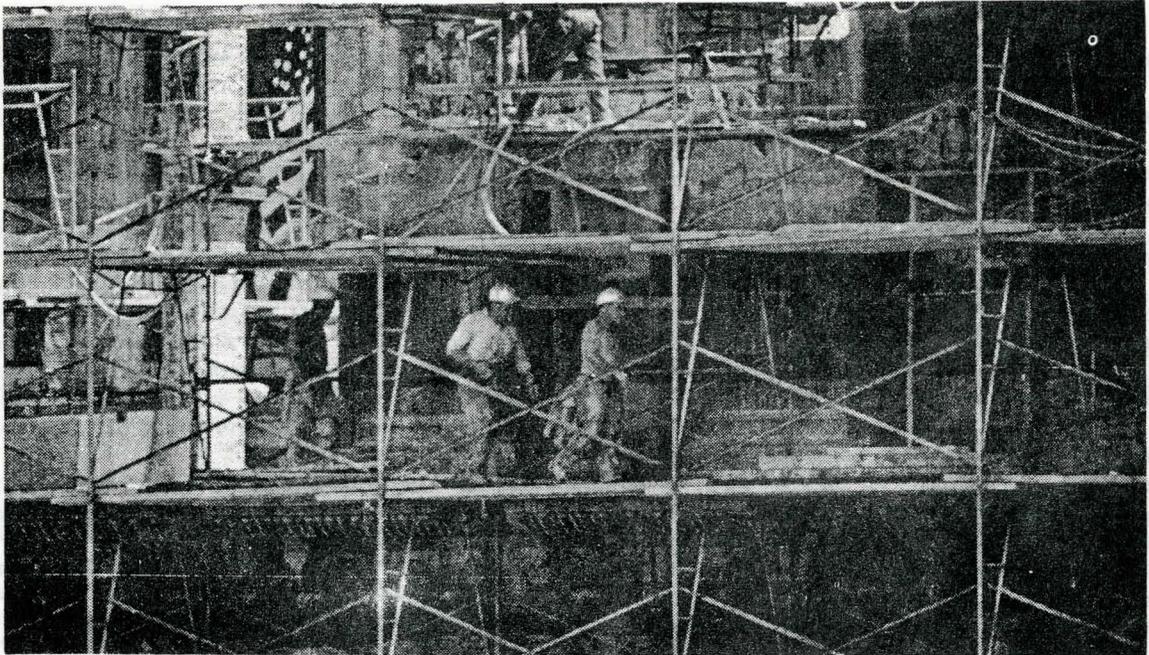
If all the workers are union workers the work can be shared out fairly. And if all the workers are union workers there will be more work to share out, because all the work that is non-union now will have to be union.

Don't forget, there is a rising need for construction. The only question is, under what condi-



tions will the work be done? Will Big Business be able to come in, like it wants to, and wipe out the gains workers have already made? There are 870,000 contractors in this country. Most are small and have a hard time staying in business. Big Business could easily set up a few big construction firms that would force most of the small fry out. That is the whole direction of the Big Business plan. Only by overcoming the traditional divisions between the trades, and by uniting all the workers—black and white—can this threat be fought.

Big Business is prepared to go further if it can get away with it and do without the skilled trades altogether by introducing various forms of prefabrication. This will do away with carpenters, electricians, lathers, plumbers, concrete finishers and a host of other trades, and use instead low-wage factory labor. These new housing factories will use 65 per cent unskilled labor. Well, the construction unions better get on the stick, be ready to organize these new workers—who are going to be largely



Safe working conditions?

black—and insist on journeymen's wages for them, or a lot of white journeymen will lose their jobs. If Big Business can't drive the wages down they have no reason to open the factories.

The only way white construction workers can maintain the present scale and improve it in the future is to make sure that every black construction worker is in the union, covered by the contract and working steadily on a union job! Only company men can be against a crash organizing program.

No matter how you look at it, unless white construction workers overcome their racist prejudices and unite with black construction workers, the white construction workers will lose out.

Top Priority: Preferential Organizing

It should be obvious that what is needed is a broad campaign to guarantee that the men are unified. This would include:

- Organize every single non-union journeyman and apprentice, most of whom are black. Waive the initiation fees. We need them in; we can't win if they are not.

- Organize every branch of the industry. No non-union work anywhere. If any boss refuses to sign a union contract guaranteeing union wages and conditions we have to be prepared to shut down every big job in the area. Let the big bosses suffer; then they will bring the others into line.

Both of these steps will only be done by the construction workers themselves. We can't trust the present union leaders to do it. Practically all of them have been bought off already. Technically, every member has the right to police his area to keep non-union workers out. This would be the logical extension of that—make every worker a union worker and force every boss to sign with the union.

- From now on concentrate on bringing young black guys into the industry and the union as apprentices. In this way the old pattern of racist division won't be able to re-emerge. Shorten the apprenticeship period and make the training more up-to-date and realistic.

The plain fact is that we have to give preferential attention to black journeymen and apprentices and to young black workers who might like to get into the industry if we are to beat the company attacks.

Present Unions Can't Do the Job

The present 26 construction unions can't even protect the different trades from yesterday's problems. They can't begin to do the job for today's dangerous company attacks. First of all the whole idea of 26 unions is no good. Everyone has had the experience of seeing, for example, the operating engineers walk off but the carpenters stay and work. Next time around, the carpenters have a beef, but the engineers won't support them. All the trades are weakened. What is needed is one union of construction workers so that the full strength of the workers can be brought to bear whenever it is needed.

The need for this type of organization will become greater as Big Business succeeds in introducing new methods of prefabrication that bring more unskilled workers into the industry but out of the jurisdictions of the different craft unions. If the craft union bosses let these men work at factory wages—like carpenter's chief Maurice Hutcheson agreed to do—there will be no way to prevent prefabrication from replacing higher paid journeymen.

The only ones who benefit from the existence of 26 construction unions are the union leaders. You

OPERATING ENGINEERS REBEL IN LOS ANGELES

LOS ANGELES—Twenty-three thousand members of Local 12 of the Operating Engineers struck July 19 against a deal cooked up between their bosses and the heads of their union. After four weeks of "negotiations," a ratification meeting was called for July 19 at 9 A.M. However, misjudging the temper of the workers, the bosses scrapped the proposed contract, "agreed" to three hours before the meeting, and reverted back to a continuation of the old contract. This "offer" meant an average of 15c an hour over a *five-year* contract, which amounts to about \$4.00 a week after taxes each year, far behind the skyrocketing cost of living. The overwhelming majority of the 7,500 workers present at the meeting rejected this sellout and hit the bricks.

The bosses have introduced a new wrinkle—following their fellow bosses on the railroads—by taking out strike insurance. The contractors have arranged with Lloyds of London to pay them, for example, \$40,000 a day for the length of a strike on a contract with a \$10-million payroll. And, naturally, the premium for this insurance is a tax write-off for the bosses. This would enable them to hold out much longer against the workers.

The union misleaders fell right into the bosses' bag by making the main issue in the strike the right of the workers to have such insurance also! That is, these phonies say that the union members should also be covered and paid their wages while they are out on strike, otherwise all the "leverage" will be on the bosses' side! This makes the fight between two insurance companies as to who will hold out

longer. The militancy and potential unity of the workers—the real key to victory—is pushed even further into the background while the union flunkies and the bosses shadow box over non-existent issues. And this will set a precedent for future contract fights in the construction industry.

Making a battle over strike insurance the main issue further hides the real issues, such as racism. Why does a union local covering Southern California with 23,000 members have less than 100 black members? Why is an apprenticeship program just now graduating its first class, when the union is one of the more highly organized in the construction industry? Why is there not preferential minority enrollment in the apprenticeship program?

OUR BASIC DEMANDS

1. Fight racism: oppose the company union policy of denying work to black and Mexican-Americans. All job openings should be made available to black and Mexican-Americans until their proportion of the union membership at least equals their proportion in the working class. Unity based on fighting racism is key to victory in any working class struggle against the bosses.
2. Fight compulsory overtime.
3. Demand pay from the time the boss tells you to report.
4. Demand to get back all money you put into the pension plan even if you leave the union before you retire.
5. Do not work on unsafe equipment.

could hardly find a more corrupt bunch. You hump to get nine months' work; they get paid every week like clockwork. They have higher-than-scale salaries, union paid-for-and-maintained cars, fat, sometimes unlimited, expense accounts, special grants for conventions, pay-offs from contractors, rake-offs from welfare funds. And it is all inherited. Maurice Hutcheson, head of the carpenters, inherited the job from his father; together they've run the union 54 years. The head of the painters, Sylvester Rafferty, inherited the job from his father. When John Lyons, head of the ironworkers died, John Jr. became the new chief. And the same kind of thing goes on in the locals. None of these crooks ever did anything for the men, although all build up a clique who always get the best jobs and stay loyal to the machine. These guys will suffer from changing the present union structure.

They are the ones interested in keeping the black workers out—in fact in keeping everybody out

since the new members might threaten their reelection or their clique's position. It won't hurt to get rid of all of them. But they are a handful. Two million union men have a different interest.

But these unions are rotten apart from their bad structure and their corrupt leaders. Every one of them is completely undemocratic. The top guys have all the power. What they say is law. The members have one right—the right to pay dues—and one privilege—the privilege of keeping quiet. Otherwise you don't work. No one would willingly join such an organization, except that you need to in order to work.

Without rank-and-file groups being formed in each local of each union the members will never be able to have any say in what goes on in the union. Without rank-and-file groups being formed there will never be any unity of the workers.

The members need to take over the unions, or we'll all be sold down the river like the miners

were by the Mine Workers union after World War II. Instead of 26 unions each run like a little kingdom, there needs to be one union of construction workers run democratically by the members. (Of course there will be special departments within the union to handle the special problems of different groups of workers.)

• "Let's get the Government to help us."

Impossible! This is a job for the construction workers ourselves, and the Government is on the other side.

No sooner did the Big Business attack on the building workers get organized, than President Nixon announced he would help the "fight against inflation" by cutting out three-quarters of all Federal construction (the stick beating the union workers, but helping the non-union companies). Then Nixon set up a "Construction Industry Collective Bargaining Commission" to "develop new procedures for settling disputes" (meaning take away the right to strike and introduce compulsory arbitration) and also to "seek solutions to problems that directly affect the industry's ability to grow and adapt to changing needs" (meaning knock out job security). Now this commission has announced it will study the wage scale to see if it is too high.

Nixon's commission came right out of the office of Roger Blough, head of the new command center for attacking the construction workers. But it has always been like that. The Government has always protected the interests of Big Business.

When Big Business was slavery, the Government protected the slave owners. It tracked down escaped slaves for the owners and returned them. In the war with Spain it tried to recapture thousands of slaves who had escaped to Spanish-owned Florida.

When Big Business was railroad building, the Government gave away the nation's land to the railroad companies, arranged to import workers and sent in the Army to prevent strikes over the horrible working conditions and low pay.

When manufacturing became Big Business, the Government made strikes illegal and shot down strikers. When it became impossible to shoot down all the strikers and still keep the factories running the bosses changed tactics. They bribed the union leaders instead so they wouldn't fight for their men. That's just how it is now in the construction industry.

That is why the Government can't help us. Not this government. It's a bosses machine. It can only work for them.

We would need to organize a whole new kind of government that serves the interests of working people only. The working people would have to have absolute control over the government. That would take a revolution. That would mean socialism. (*Short of socialism no government will help the workers when they fight Big Business. Every government except a socialist government is a Big Business government.*)

