

Hard work & Determined Spirits – the history of the Laborers International Union of North America – 1903-2003

*“A shovel, a pick, a hod
cold steel and timber
that warm, sweating
human hands bring to life.”*

As the North American economy unfolded, bridging rivers, laying track, pouring roads and building structures, workers answered the call with their ready wits, strong backs and determined attitudes.

The Laborer dug the early canals and laid early rail lines, insuring a sound economic structure.

But who will protect the Laborer? Who will speak for the immigrants and slaves whose hard labor developed the nation?

Building the Laborers International Union of North America was a century-long effort, a unique union that opened its doors to every worker, from the native to the foreign-born, regardless of race, color, creed or gender. The Laborers took on the daunting task of organizing the unorganized, the lowest rung on the labor scale, building an effective union that guaranteed justice and honor through united strength.

The Early Union

Skilled construction craft workers, brick masons, carpenters and plasterers, had city union organizations that predated the U.S. Civil War. Hod carriers and laborers worked alongside these early unions, but were excluded from their organizations. Laborers work

was often the dirtiest, heaviest work, and skilled craft workers did not include Laborers in their unions or apprenticeship programs.

Away from urban areas, where canals and railroads were being excavated, leveled and track laid, all by hand labor, there were no unions. In the pre-Civil War period immigrant workers, Germans, Swedish, and particularly Irish workers, took these jobs at wages averaging about \$1 per day. Occasionally workers organized, but around specific grievances. They would often lay down their tools to insure prompt wage payment or to protest poor conditions. Death and injury tolls from accidents were high, but particularly devastating were infectious diseases like cholera and dysentery, which could wipe out an entire labor camp in a few short days.

After the Civil War, newly freed slaves and eventually immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, and Asian workers on the Pacific coast, joined the railroad construction boom, facing the same miserable conditions.

In the booming cities, where streets were being paved and large buildings erected, laborers found work as hod carriers, plasterer tenders, pavers and general building laborers. In some cities these workers built city unions, supported by other building trades unions. Chicago laborers claim organization back to 1861. These early city laborer unions were often organized on ethnic lines or by the specific craft they tended.

After the Civil War other building trades, like carpenters, lathers, and plasterers, formed national organizations. These early unions united in a national labor federation in 1881, reorganizing themselves in 1886 as the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

The AFL sought to organize all workers in craft unions, and in a time of socialist ferment, to win better wages and conditions, not necessarily change the nation's governance.

Workers without a national organization, like laborers, the AFL organized into Federal Labor Unions. These local organizations reported directly to the AFL and attempted to negotiate area conditions.

As the 20th century dawned, enough local laborer organizations were functioning that Samuel Gompers, AFL President, sent out a convention call on March 12, 1903, hoping to form a national union.

The Hod Carriers & Building Laborers Begin

From April 13-17, 1903, 25 delegates from 17 different cities met in the nation's capitol. The 23 locals represented ranged the eastern seaboard from Maine to Washington, D.C. The furthest west and the largest membership came from Chicago. Most of the cities represented had fewer than 100 members, but Chicago weighed in with over 6,000 laborers from three different locals.

Gompers encouraged the new union to organize all workers, regardless of nationality, creed or color. This openness was the AFL's official policy, but in reality, many unions were segregated, not only on racial lines, but also by ethnicity. Building a truly inclusive union was one of the Laborers' first challenges.

The new organization christened itself the "International Hod Carriers and Building Laborers Union of North America." It affiliated with the AFL, wrote a constitution, set a per capita tax of 5 cents per member per month, adopted a \$10 charter fee for new unions

and adopted its official seal as a crossed hod, hoe and shovel, encircled by the union's name.

The first president elected was Hermon Lilien, a Belgian immigrant from Chicago Local 4, and Harold Stemburgh of Waverly, New York, was elected secretary-treasurer. He would operate the national organization from his home town.

25 people starting a union was one thing, but building an effective national organization was another challenge.

The new union faced rival organizations, ethnic division and weak finances.

Two other organizations, the International Laborers Unions of Dayton, Ohio, and the Building Laborers International Protective Association of Lowell, Massachusetts, also claimed to represent Laborers.

Thousands of new immigrants, particularly from Southern and Eastern Europe, were pouring into America, eager for work and willing to endure miserable conditions. The first wave of African-Americans were beginning the "Great Migration" from southern sharecropping. Would this new union include all of these workers and how would it organize them?

Finally, the 5 cents per capita the delegates voted for a national organization was insufficient for a fledging organization, leaving it few funds to pay staff and establish a national presence.

Rivalries

The early Laborers union overcame its national rivals through its affiliation with the AFL. Building Trades councils were active in various cities and the AFL encouraged these organizations to recognize the Hod Carriers and Laborers as the official union.

A few months after the first convention, the new union received the Bricklayers' endorsement. Later that summer the new union joined the Structural Building Trades Alliance, uniting with other construction unions. These efforts gave the new Laborers union legitimacy with other trades. In Pittsburgh and in Patterson, New Jersey, rival unions were forced from the job because the Laborers were recognized as the official AFL union. These rival organizations, often already existing in local areas, caused much confusion and intensive battles were fought between the Laborers and its rivals. By the first decade's end, the Hod Carriers & Building Laborers had established themselves as the legitimate AFL union.

Ethnic Inclusion

“We hold that all men are created free and equal and that honor and merit make the man... Together under one grand banner all of those who toil on buildings within our craft and calling... we solemnly bind ourselves...”

(International Hod Carriers founding constitution)

The early union was chartered to include all workers, regardless of background. In many cases, the new union upheld this principle. Early documents were printed in English, German and Italian, with convention resolutions passed to offer them in Spanish and French.

Division occurred, not just around racial issues, but also ethnicity. As thousands of new immigrants came into the U.S. they often formed their own organizations or were excluded from existing unions.

The new union preached inclusion, but was often challenged by local custom. The early Chicago locals joined the national union already ethnically organized. In some cities, the Laborers accepted these ethnic organizations and chartered additional ethnic locals. In other case, it pressed for inclusive organizations that were open to all workers. In Omaha, white workers were denied a separate charter and encouraged to join existing Local 78, which included African-Americans.

Like the nation, the new union faced the test of ethnicity and race. While other unions turned their backs on new immigrants, African-Americans and Latinos, the new union welcomed them.

Growing pains

When the Laborers were chartered, Samuel Gompers warned them against setting per capita fees too low. The early 5 cents per capita proved inadequate for a national organization.

With limited financial backing, the early union's address and officers changed frequently. The early union met in annual convention, an expensive undertaking. Chicagoan Herman Lilien declined to run for re-election in 1905 and was replaced by another Chicagoan, Michael Knipfer. However, he and his local union were shortly expelled for non-payment of per capita. He was briefly succeeded by First Vice-President August Palutze of Cleveland. At the 1906 convention another Chicago Local 4 leader, John Breen, was elected president.

Because the early organization was financially faltering it could offer few services. In 1904 the union's "*Official Journal*" began publication, but on a subscription basis, which meant barely one-eighth of the memberships participated. In May 1905 members voted

to raise per capita to 10 cents per month. At the 1906 convention, this was raised another nickel to 15 cents per month. The “Official Journal” was now offered to all members and strike and death benefits were established. In 1908 the Laborers affiliated with the Trades & Labor Congress of Canada.

Meanwhile, the union headquarters moved. From its original home in Waverly, New York, the new union’s headquarters sojourned to Syracuse, Chicago, Elmira and Albany, New York.

The early Laborers greatly depended upon the AFL. AFL organizers were rewarded with a five dollar fee for chartering new Laborers locals. Meanwhile, the AFL was covering the organizer’s expenses, so costs for the fledging national union were low.

Early unions & their conditions

In some cities Laborers had already established unions, which joined the new union. The Laborers chartered many new locals. The majority did not survive. Like the construction industry, early union organization reflected economic conditions, with local unions beginning and the Laborers’ membership growing in strong seasons, but faltering in a weak economy.

By the end of 1903 the new union was receiving per capita on over 2,000 members, which continued to grow to over 11,000 by 1907. The economy then faltered, dropping membership below 8,000, not surpassing 11,000 again until 1911.

The early union chartered 136 locals through the end of 1903, including its first Canadian affiliate in Kingston, Ontario. However, chartering a union was one thing, sustaining it

another. Only 33 of those original locals survived through 1911. 456 additional local unions were chartered between 1904-1910, but not all lasted.

Early “*Official Journal*” records relay member’s wages and working conditions:

Laborers’ wages

1906

Sheboygan, Wisconsin (8 hour day)

| | |
|------------------|----------------|
| Hod Carriers | \$.25 an hour |
| Building Laborer | \$.23 an hour |

Stockton, California (8 hour day)

| | |
|-------------------------|----------------------|
| Brick wheeler | \$.37 ½ an hour |
| Mortar tenders & mixers | \$.43 ¾ an hour |
| Plasterer Tenders | \$.50 cents an hour |

Brooklyn, New York

| | |
|--------------|------------------------|
| Hod Carriers | \$.37 ½ cents an hour |
|--------------|------------------------|

Cincinnati, Ohio (8 hour day)

| | |
|------------------|------------------------|
| Hod Carriers | \$.37 ½ cents an hour |
| Plasterer tender | \$.40 cents an hour |

Chicago, Illinois Local 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 69, 78 & 178 (8 hour day)

| | |
|------------------------|--------------|
| Building laborers | \$2.80 a day |
| Wench and windless men | \$3.20 a day |
| Caisson men | \$4.00 a day |

Galesburg, Illinois

| | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| Hod Carriers & Laborers | \$.25 an hour |
|-------------------------|----------------|

Minneapolis, Minnesota Local 14 (9 hour day)

| | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| Hod Carriers & Laborers | \$.25 an hour |
|-------------------------|----------------|

1907

Spokane, Washington Local 208

| | |
|------------------|--------------|
| Concrete men: | \$3.50 daily |
| Hod Carriers | \$4.00 daily |
| Plasterer tender | \$4.50 daily |

Rutland, Vermont Local 192 (8 hour day)

Laborer \$.25 an hour

New York Locals 64, 65, 125, 129, 195 (8 hour day)

Laborer (minimum) \$.37 ½ per hour

The early union could point to concrete economic gains for its members. President Breen reported visiting Pittsburgh in June 1906. Conditions there were 17 ½ cents an hour for a 10-hour day. After negotiations, the new union achieved an 8 ½ hour day, at 25 cents per hour for building laborers and hod carriers, 35 cents for scaffold men and mortar mixers.

The D'Alessandro era

The young union finally stabilized under the leadership of Italian immigrant Dominic D'Alessandro. Before his death in 1926, D'Alessandro guided the Laborers from under 10,000 to over 100,000 members.

Born in Avesta, Italy, near Rome, D'Alessandro immigrated to Boston in 1898. Like many immigrants from his native land, D'Alessandro was victimized by a system that undercut conditions from previous Irish immigrants, using Italians as cheap labor. The "padroni" system was a labor contractor system. The padroni, or "bosses," acted as employment agents, loan sharks, slumlords and company store owners. They would contract with employers to deliver workers to a job site. The workers often already owed the padroni for ocean passage from Italy and were trapped in involuntary servitude, paying back debts and paying again for each new job.

D'Alessandro managed to rise above this system, finding work as a bricklayer. He founded a Dante Aligheri Society branch to educate his fellow immigrants. He started a

small bank to support immigrants. With the support of Baron Gustavo Tosti, the Italian consul in Boston, D'Alessandro began a unionization drive. Although excluded from the Irish union, which was not affiliated with the Laborers, the new effort won support from the AFL and the Laborers. After mass meetings in 1904, D'Alessandro won a federal labor union charter from the AFL on May 29, 1904. With Central Labor Council support, they won \$2 a day wages for laborers, a significant raise. A year later, on June 23, 1905, the Italian local became Laborers Local 209.

The existing Irish organizations refused amalgamation, so D'Alessandro petitioned and established a separate local, 223, to bring the Irish Laborers into the AFL Laborers. Using the AFL connections, the independent unions were undermined until they affiliated.

D'Alessandro continued educating immigrants, including passing legislation to curtail the padroni. The Italian government established a Benevolent Aid Society for Italian Immigrants in Boston, under D'Alessandro's control. The new union established hiring halls to curtail the padroni. Within two years, D'Alessandro had over 2,000 members in his fledging organization.

In February 1907 the Laborers appointed D'Alessandro a general organizer. Later that year he was elected a union vice-president. With some locals lax in paying per capita, D'Alessandro was able to win control of the national union, with Gompers' support. AFL organizer Jacob Talezaar temporarily served as Secretary-Treasurer, soon replaced by Canadian board member Earnest Villiard.

At the 1909 convention, both D'Alessandro and Villiard were re-elected. Membership was low and the union was running a \$3,000 deficit. D'Alessandro quickly financially

stabilized the young union. Villiard resigned in 1910 and was replaced by Achilles Persion of Albany Local 190, who served as General Secretary-Treasurer until 1950.

To cut costs, D'Alessandro ended the "*Official Journal*" in 1909. After the 1911 convention, members voted by referendum to not hold a convention. Members continued to vote not to hold conventions through 1941. By 1911 there were 159 affiliated local unions.

First Benefits

A death benefit was one of the first proposals the early Laborers debated, realizing it by 1907. The initial death benefit was set at \$75 for members, \$50 for those with less than one year's service. Five cents per member was also set aside for a strike fund. By 1919 the young organization was paying out \$20,000 annually to members in death benefits.

With Chicago's locals reaffiliated after 1910, the Laborers had a firm base again. The union also claimed new jurisdiction. As concrete technology emerged in the early 1900s, the Laborers claimed the work, winning jurisdiction from the AFL over the American Cement Workers. That union was dissolved in 1916 and its members split between the Laborers and the Operative Plasterers & Cement Masons.

The union also changed its name – twice – in 1912. To insure building laborers were included in the union's jurisdiction, the name was originally changed to the "International Hod Carriers and Common Laborers Union of America" by membership referendum in September 1912. Three months later, through a second vote, the members changed the name to the "International Hod Carriers', Building and Common Laborers' Union of America." This name would last until 1965. The union continued to expand, authorizing

\$2000 for organizers in 1913. The Laborers showed their solidarity with the Western Federation of Miners, sending them \$500 in 1914 to support Michigan copper strikers.

World War I

Government spending on western reclamation, \$75 million for hard roads in 1916 and World War I all increased employment opportunities and boosted local unions.

Construction volume jumped from \$3.8 billion in 1916 to \$6.3 billion in 1919. Wartime pressure also brought inflation, boosting workers' wages.

The young union supported the government during the World War, buying and assisting in Liberty Bond drives. Union members serving in the armed forces could re-enter the union after serving without repaying initiation and with no loss of seniority, provided they rejoined within 60 days of discharge. Union members paid a special one dollar annual assessment for death benefits for members killed in the line of duty.

With membership growing, the union finally built its own home. In 1918 the union moved into its first permanent headquarters in Quincy, Massachusetts. The union, after an intensive debate and despite its high immigrant population, voted that membership must either be or intend to become U.S. or Canadian citizens.

The Laborers also expanded jurisdiction during the war, adding shipyard laborers and in 1917 merged in the "International Compressed Air and Foundation Workers of the U.S. and Canada." In 1917 the AFL assigned "street cleaners" to the Laborers and merged in some small locals.

Wages in the union's second decade

Boston, Massachusetts (after a 1916 strike)

| | |
|--------------|----------------|
| Hod Carriers | \$.40 an hour |
|--------------|----------------|

| | |
|----------------------------------|------------------|
| Laborers | \$.27 ½ an hour |
| St Louis Local 22 (1916) | |
| Laborers | \$.35 an hour |
| St Louis District Council (1918) | |
| Compressed Air workers | \$.87 ½ an hour |
| Lock Tenders | \$.56 ¼ an hour |
| Lake County, Indiana (1918) | |
| Building Laborers | \$.60 an hour |

In 1919, after the Chicago District Council intervened in a job dispute in South Bend, Indiana, workers waged were raised from 45 cents an hour to 60 cents an hour, with time and one-half for overtime.

Post World War I

The post-war period was a time of retrenchment for labor. Business promoted the “American Plan,” attempting to slow the union movement. The Boston Police Strike in 1919 raised public fears about unionization. The Ku Klux Klan revitalized in the American South and Midwest, not only curtailing African-American freedom, but also inveighing against Catholics, Jews and immigrants. Immigration laws restricted access to the U.S. The Republican Warren Harding Administration thwarted many pro-labor initiatives of the Wilson years.

Many attempted to paint organized labor as a radical front. In 1921 the Laborers allowed local unions to expel members who were also part of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a radical organization attempting to form “one big union.”

Despite the political climate, the Laborers continued a steady growth. After a post-war downturn, the industry boomed, with new office buildings in cities and road paving projects reaching rural areas. The Laborers, consciously protecting their jurisdiction, also

organized new construction jobs. Joseph Moreschi of the Chicago District Council was sent into rural and small town Illinois to organize road pavers into the Laborers.

Racial issues still raised their head; in 1921 white workers in Cincinnati and Kansas City petitioned the union for separate charters from African-American workers. In both cases, the Laborers allowed only one, integrated local in the community. The union debated setting local union dues at a minimum of \$1 per month. International per capita remained at 15 cents per member per month. As the organization matured, it strengthened internal organization, requiring district councils to start quarterly reports to the international union in 1923. The union started the decade in 1920 with almost 80,000 members, dipped below 54,000 in 1922 and surpassed 95,000 by 1928.

For the international union, the most significant break was the death of D'Alessandro on September 11, 1926. A few days later, Joseph Moreschi, member one from Chicago Local 1, was elected to replace him.

As the 1920s drew to a close, the Laborers were optimistic. Construction boomed through 1928 and 1929. The union celebrated its centennial in 1928 with a Washington dinner. On October 11, 1930, a monument was dedicated over D'Alessandro's grave in Quincy, Massachusetts. The union had a staff of 11 in 1928, sending an organizer to Vancouver, British Columbia to spread the union westward. Donations and organizers were sent to assist the United Mine Workers in their 1928 strike. The Terrazzo helpers were unsuccessfully challenged as doing Laborers work and initiation fees were set at a minimum of \$5, no more than \$50.

The Laborers endorsed the "Five Day Week," participating in a national labor effort to eliminate Saturday work, successfully winning it in many local contracts.

The Laborers expanded their jurisdiction further in 1929 by merging in “Tunnel and Subway Constructors International Union.”

As the decade ended, Laborers voted by national referendum to raise their death benefit to \$200 for a member who joined before age 50 and had been members for two years; \$100 for those with one year’s service and less than age 50; and \$50 for those with less than one year’s service. Members also voted to raise the per capita tax to 35 cents per member per month.

Laborers wages

Charleston, West Virginia (1923)

| | |
|--------------|----------------|
| Hod Carriers | \$.75 an hour |
|--------------|----------------|

1928 wages

Louisville, Kentucky

| | |
|-------------------|----------------|
| Plasterer tenders | \$.90 an hour |
|-------------------|----------------|

| | |
|----------|----------------|
| Laborers | \$.35 an hour |
|----------|----------------|

Alton, Illinois District Council

| | |
|------------------|----------------|
| Plasterer Tender | \$1.25 an hour |
|------------------|----------------|

| | |
|-------------------|----------------|
| Bricklayer Tender | \$1.15 an hour |
|-------------------|----------------|

| | |
|---------|----------------|
| Laborer | \$.75 an hour |
|---------|----------------|

New York, N.Y.

| | |
|------------|----------------|
| Excavators | \$7.50 per day |
|------------|----------------|

| | |
|---------|----------------|
| Top men | \$4.50 per day |
|---------|----------------|

Jersey City, New Jersey

| | |
|----------|-----------------|
| Laborers | \$.90 per hour |
|----------|-----------------|

Butte, Montana

| | |
|----------|----------------|
| Laborers | \$8.00 per day |
|----------|----------------|

Portland, Oregon

Plasterer tender

\$9.00 a day

1930s: A dark decade turns bright

Despite an optimistic 1920s, by the early 1930s Laborers were feeling the Depression's onslaught. Laborers were no longer concerned about a five-day week, they were anxious for any work they could find. One in three Americans was out of work. The Building Trades were particularly hard hit, as private dollars for new construction disappeared. By 1933 13 million Americans were out of work.

Membership fell throughout the labor movement, but particularly for the Laborers. With almost 100,000 members in 1929, by 1933 the Laborers had less than 27,000 members. By 1932 over 50 locals were suspended for non-payment of per capita. Laborers who normally built roads and buildings were now walking in soup lines. The times were desperate and workers called for change.

The international union reduced salaries and expenses to keep the organization afloat. The Chicago District Council was subsidized to keep the door open in that hard-hit city. One bright spot in 1932 was passage of the federal Davis-Bacon Act, establishing building trades prevailing wages on federal construction projects.

President Herbert Hoover had released some federal loans for construction but hoped that local charities would sustain the jobless. Workers overwhelmingly voted Democrat in 1932, electing President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt unleashed public works projects, most dramatically with huge western dams, reclamation projects and the Tennessee Valley Authority. These large construction projects created jobs for thousands

of unemployed laborers, able again to work at their calling. Roosevelt's National Recovery Act (NRA) was embraced by the Laborers, as it began to set minimum standards for working conditions.

As federal funds flowed into construction, the Laborers were ready, either with revitalized or new local unions. The late 1930s was the greatest historic growth in union membership. In 1935 Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act, insuring private sector workers a right to union representation. In that same year John L. Lewis, United Mine Workers president, split from the AFL and formed the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The CIO "organized the unorganized," in heavy industries like auto and steel. Spurred by the CIO efforts, AFL unions like the Laborers re-energized their efforts and also boosted membership. Moreschi made a national trip in 1936, organizing new workers, establishing regional headquarters and hiring 30 organizers. Over 7 million workers joined unions from 1936-1939. The Laborers merged with an additional union in 1937, the "International Union of Pavers, Rammermen, Flag Layers, abridge and Stone Curb Setters and Sheet Asphalt Pavers." This insured Laborers jurisdiction in road building as millions were pouring into hard road construction. From their low of 26,000 members in 1933, the Laborers surpassed 101,000 members in 1937 and continued to grow.

Laborers Wages

New York City, 1935 Locals 45, 102, 250, 266 & 731

In open cuts

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Drill runners | \$1.10 per hour |
| Blasters | \$1.65 |
| Sheeting, Lagging, Bracing & Propping | \$1.00 |
| Laborers serving mechanics | \$1.00 |
| All others | \$.80 |
| In free air | |
| Miners & drill runners (in free air) | \$1.25 |

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Helpers | \$1.00 |
| All others | \$.85 |
| In compressed air (six hour day) | |
| Blasters | \$12.50 per day |
| Lock Tenders | \$12.00 |
| Miners | \$12.00 |
| All others | \$11.00 |

Answering the nation's call

Europe was in war by September 1939 and war clouds loomed on the U.S. horizon as the Laborers gathered in St. Louis in September 1941 for their first convention since 1911. Under federal pressure to convene and with a positive vote from the membership, the union reflected on almost 40 active years of service. The convention reported on all union activities since the previous convention, but also elected officers, engaged in vigorous floor debate and took a strong civil rights stance. In 1940 the International Union moved from Quincy, Mass. to Washington, D.C., sharing quarters with the Bricklayers and other unions in the Bowen Building.

As the Laborers met, World War II was only two months away. The union pledged its support, even before war was declared. When the draft resumed in 1940, the union granted the same recall rights as World War I, allowing military personnel to rejoin the union after their service, provided they did so within 60 days of service ending. When war was declared, the union executive board was in session and immediately drafted a statement of strong support for the war effort.

Thousands of Laborers served in all military branches; on the "home front," there was a continual demand for workers, as war plants, new roads and military bases all needed quick construction. The Laborers membership quickly peaked over 200,000 by 1942.

Women went to work in numerous defense plants; although few in number, some women did join the Laborers and work construction.

AFL and CIO unions cooperated with the government during the war effort with a no-strike pledge. Unlike World War I, wage and price controls, along with product rationing, were quickly imposed, to insure resources were directed to defense needs. Since workers were unable to win wage improvements, government regulation allowed them to win benefit improvements after 1944. Many unions, unable to establish higher wages, instead began establishing pension and welfare programs.

In the post-war period, labor feared another recession, like World War I. Instead pent-up demand for consumer products caused price inflation. 1946 was the greatest strike year in U.S. history, as numerous workers demanded wages to keep up with inflation. Laborers president Joseph Moreschi instead preached labor-management cooperation, with both groups recognizing their legitimate role.

The strike wave brought a public reaction and the Republican Party gained control of the U.S. Congress. They passed the Taft-Hartley Act, a law which restricted union organizing and allowed states to outlaw the union shop.

After a brief post-war dip, construction boomed and Laborers membership grew again. Returning veterans wanted new homes, business expanded and as automobile ownership grew, more and more roads were built. The demand was so great the biggest problem was not workers, but enough building materials. In 1947 the Laborers held a brief convention, to realign the union's constitution with the Taft-Hartley Act. "*The Laborer*" first appeared in 1947. In 1949 the Laborers signed their first national agreement, with pipeline contractors.

Laborers wages

The International Union computed average national hourly rates for Laborers as:

| | |
|------|---------|
| 1939 | \$.79 |
| 1940 | \$.92 |
| 1941 | \$1. 05 |
| 1942 | \$1.25 |
| 1943 | \$1.37 |

Detroit Laborers

| | |
|------|-------------------|
| 1945 | \$1.57 ½ per hour |
|------|-------------------|

Newark Laborers

| | |
|------|-------------------|
| 1948 | \$2.12 ½ per hour |
|------|-------------------|

Charleston, S.C. Laborers

| | |
|------|---------------|
| 1948 | \$.75 an hour |
|------|---------------|

A time of prosperity and growth

The 1950s was a prosperous decade for most Americans. Although construction lagged briefly at the decade's end, building boomed across the country. The 1954 Interstate Highway Act injected millions of federal dollars into road programs. Atomic energy brought huge power plant projects. Dam building and other western reclamation projects kept Laborers busy.

Despite the outward veneer, pockets of poverty persisted in America. While some unions were still segregated, the Laborers continued to open their doors to all workers and remained an advocate for equal rights.

The decade began with the 1950 loss of a union pioneer, general secretary-treasurer Achilles Pension, who had served since 1910. Peter Fosco of Chicago Local 2 replaced

Pension. Many locals, district councils and regions established their first health and welfare programs in this decade. In 1956 Pittsburgh Laborers established their first pension, with their first pensioner drawing a check in 1958. *"The Laborer"* featured a safety message on each month's back cover. The union became more safety conscious, working closely with the National Safety Council to educate members. From the Pacific Northwest, the union promoted the "Turtle Club," certificates for workers saved from serious injury by wearing their hard hats. Many universities initiated labor education programs after World War II, and Laborers used these programs regionally for leadership training.

In June 1951 the International union signed a national agreement with the Railway Track Contractors. In January 1955 the National Joint Heavy and Highway Construction Committee was formed by the Laborers, Carpenters, Teamsters and Operating Engineers to negotiate jurisdictional disputes and to insure union members were hired on highway jobs. In December 1955 the AFL and CIO merged, creating a united front for American labor.

Traditionally the Laborers did not take an outward political stance, though they aided the AFL in Washington lobby efforts. Although not endorsing candidates, the union encouraged voter registration and participation by members. The International Union's staff grew to over 50. As a maturing organization, Laborers across the country participated in their community, aiding charitable projects, particularly with donated labor. As the decade closed, the union initiated construction of its own headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Into the turbulent 1960s

The 1960s dawned bright for the Laborers. On May 14, 1960 the union moved into its new headquarters. The close election of President John F. Kennedy brought a union

friend into office. The Laborers met at the White House in 1962 with President Kennedy and other unions, pledging non-discrimination in hiring. When Lyndon Johnson succeeded assassinated President Kennedy, the Laborers pledged support to Johnson's "War on Poverty." In 1964 the Laborers broke their traditional neutrality in national elections and endorsed Johnson. At the 1966 convention the union established the Laborers Political League to influence electoral candidates and encourage members political participation.

The union leadership kicked off 1961 with a national bus tour. Covering 39 states, the union's executive board met with 768 different local unions at regional meetings, plus made separate trips to Canada, Alaska and Hawaii. Promoting safety, the international union declared "war on cave-ins," educating members on safe practices and pushing for protective legislation. By decade's end the push was for a comprehensive safety law, which became OSHA in 1970. The union celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1963, near the half-million mark in membership. In 1967 the union negotiated portability between various regional and local pension funds, allowing members working in different jurisdictions to still collect local pension credits.

With strong federal support and a booming economy, construction remained strong, with numerous high profile projects, as suburbs grew and cities built new skyscrapers. Over 100 Navajo workers joined Albuquerque Local 16 in 1962, helping build a power plant in Kirkland, New Mexico.

In 1965, the union completed a much sought, symbolic name change. Many members resented the "common laborer" designation in the official title. After years of entreaty, the AFL-CIO allowed the organization to change its name to the "Laborers International Union of North America."

Despite the bright façade, the union was stagnating. Content with its extensive construction organization, it was not growing. Spurred by an innovative program devised by international representative, soon to be vice-president Jack Wilkerson of Kansas City, the Laborers reached out into new areas.

The new program emphasized education and training for existing members, and organizing of new members, particularly in non-traditional fields. The union plunged into both programs. Although not always successful, by decade's end the union's membership rolls were growing.

Some local unions had their own training and safety programs by the early 1950s. Lacking was a systematic national effort. In 1962 the AFL-CIO's Building & Construction Trades Department began a safety committee, with Laborers' representation. In early 1962 the Laborers noted 31 members dead on the job already that year, pledging renewed safety awareness. In 1961 the union initiated sending local union leaders to the Harvard Trade Union program. In 1965 an Education Program was established under Wilkerson and in 1967 the National Training Program was established, with Joe Short of Terre Haute, Indiana Local 204 as first director and with \$2.1 million in international union support. Six regional education directors were also hired. The Laborers held their first week-long Area Safety School in Washington, D.C., in early 1967.

Using federal grant dollars, field training programs were initiated. The first pilot project was in a Kansas City quarry in January 1967. By early 1968 nine states had negotiated training funds through hourly check-off. One year later, the Laborers - Associated

General Contractors (AGC) Training Fund was established. This was supplemented by grants from the federal Manpower Development and Training Act.

The Laborers also initiated extensive public employee organizing drives. Exempted from the National Labor Relations Act, public employees had no right to unionize. One target was service contract workers on federal military bases. These workers had labor law rights, since they were employed by private companies who contracted with the Defense Department. In 1964 the Laborers chartered Local 1057 at the Laredo Air Force base. The mostly Hispanic workforce struck in 1965, won an NLRB election, and eventually negotiated a contract for better conditions in 1969. With the Vietnam War escalating military base activity, the Laborers were able to better conditions for many service contract workers.

Although not always successful, the Laborers launched high profile organizing drives amongst public employees in the south and southwest. In 1965 the union began organizing public employees in San Antonio. Despite court injunctions, the Laborers won some improvements for San Antonio public employees. In 1967, San Francisco Local 261 won a representation election at the Tracy Defense Depot in Tracy, California. In 1969 the union led an unsuccessful effort to organize West Virginia road workers, which led to the mass firing of 3,500 state workers. The organizing effort garnered national support and wide union solidarity.

Besides public employees, the Laborers also organized cement plants and other construction industry suppliers.

Because of this successful outreach, the Laborers were a dynamic, attractive organization. In 1968 the 60,000 member “National Association of Post Office Mail Handlers, Watchmen, Messengers and Group Leaders” voted to affiliate with the Laborers. A few

months earlier the historic “Journeyman Stone Cutters Association of North America” also merged, bringing 3,000 skilled workers into the Laborers.

Union staff began participating in a national pension program in 1962. In that same year per capita to the international union increased to \$1 per member per month and minimum local dues were set at \$3. In 1967 per capita was raised to \$1.25 per month.

A long-term presence in the union passed the torch in 1968. General President Joseph Moreschi, who had served since 1926, retired. The General President became Peter Fosco. Terence J. O’Sullivan of San Francisco became General Secretary-Treasurer.

The 1970s: Training & new opportunities

The boom construction years of the 1960s stagnated in the 1970s. Inflation ate at workers’ buying power and continued social division over the Vietnam War gnawed at the national spirit. Despite these obstacles, the Laborers pushed ahead. The successful organizing drives initiated in the late 1960s continued into the 1970s and training and educational efforts expanded, but by the decade’s end unionized construction had lost market share.

A 1972 political breakthrough for the union was passage of the federal Service Contract Act. Under previous laws, federal contract workers were to receive area prevailing wages for their work, but this regulation was rarely enforced. The Laborers led the political effort to strengthen this bill, which also recognized negotiated union wages as a standard in federal contracts. In 1978 the Laborers lent significant staff to defeat a “Right-To-Work” (for less) ballot initiative in Missouri.

Continuing to expand training, the Laborers won multi-million dollar federal training grants in the early 1970s, including specialized grants for retraining Vietnam veterans. States and regions began opening training schools. In 1971 Laborers-AGC Training completed its first film and held its first national training conference. In 1972 the union hosted three regional OSHA "Train the Trainer" classes in 40-hour OSHA classes. In 1977 the Laborers piloted their own "Train the Trainer" sessions at the California training school.

The union continued to organize public employees in Alleghany County, Pennsylvania, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Montgomery, Alabama, Norfolk, Virginia and Jacksonville, Florida, along with Alabama and Titusville, Florida hospital workers; other new Laborers included resort workers at Weeki Wachee Springs, Florida and Cedar Point Amusement Park in Ohio, military service contract workers at Ft. Bliss. Pre-fab housing manufacturers Pre-Stress and Midwest Prestressed Concrete signed a national agreement in 1970. A new area was Indian Health Services. In 1974 the Laborers pushed to allow private hospital employee organizing rights and became a charter member of the AFL-CIO's Public Employee Department. In January 1978 Navajo National Health Care Employees Local 1376 organized.

In 1973 a national agreement was signed with the National Constructors Association for large scale projects. In 1974 a National Masonry Agreement was signed with the Bricklayers and masonry contractors.

After a wildcat national strike in 1970, postal workers won national contracts, including the Mail Handlers. A second contract was negotiated in 1975.

The union continued support for organizing minority workers throughout the nation and lent moral and financial support to Cesar Chavez in his efforts to organize California

agricultural workers. In 1973 when the AFL-CIO organized the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA), its first president was a Laborer, Ray Mendoza. The Laborers trained women in construction at the Indiana training school under a 1976 federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act grant.

Cooperation continued with other building and trades unions. In 1970 the Operating Engineers, Teamsters and Laborers signed a working agreement to jointly organize and settle jurisdictional disputes.

Union benefits branched out into new areas. The Central and Southern States region established their first pension plan in 1970. Shreveport, Louisiana local 229 began offering legal services to its members that year. Area-wide pension plans were established in Ontario in 1971 and in Western Canada. In 1973 Massachusetts members opened a Vision Center in Boston.

As the nation's celebrated its 1976 bicentennial the Laborers demonstrated their skills on the Capitol mall during the American Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C.

The decade ended with a national scare over the Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania nuclear plant accident. Laborers were on the job, thanks to their new training programs, to clean up.

In 1975, LIUNA president Peter Fosco died and was replaced by his son, Angelo. As the decade ended, Arthur E. Coia was appointed General Secretary-Treasurer, replacing Terence J. O'Sullivan.

Surviving the 1980s

As inflation ate at workers paychecks and high interest rates slowed construction, organized labor entered a dark decade in the 1980s. President Ronald Reagan's election signaled difficult times for unions. Labor's dismal battlegrounds for public employees were the broken PATCO strike and for industrial workers lost copper strikes in Arizona and Hormel meatpacking in Minnesota. For unionized construction workers, "double-breasted" entered the vocabulary, symbolizing contractors who would work either union or non-union.

Union construction, as a total of the workforce, declined from 1971-1982, never fully recovering, even during good economic times. By 1980, unionized construction represented only 35 percent of the total construction workforce. It was estimated that one-half million union construction jobs were lost in the 1970s. The impact was regional, with some areas suffering severe losses of union contractors, while other areas maintained their union edge.

Unionized companies complained about not being competitive, about union work rules and about union wages. By the early 1980s many Laborers local unions were freezing their wages or even taking wage reductions, to compete with non-union contractors.

The Laborers were already developing a competitive edge through their emerging training programs. The Laborers Health & Safety Fund of North America was established as a separate program in 1988. The union also encouraged labor-management dialogue and cooperation. These local efforts coalesced by the decade's end into a formal program, the Laborers-Employers Cooperation & Education Trust (LECET).

Although never completing ending, union organizing slowed during the decade, as workers with unions fought hard to maintain their rights. The Laborers continued to

organize, including winning a first contract in 1980 for industrial workers at Burlington Mills in Ontario. Many employers attempted to force unions out; the Laborers beat a decertification drive at Bon Secours hospital in Baltimore in 1982.

In 1984 the Laborers reached a mutual support agreement with the Bricklayers. The Laborers completed a national agreement with the Association of Wall and Ceiling Industries, with the Painters, Carpenters and Cement Masons. In 1987 a national agreement was signed with the Asbestos Abatement Contractors Association, insuring Laborers access to this new field of work.

The union continued expanding safety and training efforts, knowing these efforts would help contractors remain competitive. In 1985 the Laborers complete a 17-year effort when the Department of Labor recognized highway flaggers as part of Laborers work, protected by Davis-Bacon prevailing wage provisions.

Politically, the Laborers mobilized members to register and vote and return labor-friendly candidates to office. At federal hearings, the Laborers testified on the dangers of asbestos and lead, encouraging strong federal regulations to protect workers.

Increased benefits included New York locals adding drug and alcohol rehabilitation to their welfare programs in 1981. The union established a program to charter retiree councils. The first one was chartered in 1988 in conjunction with Local 795 in New Albany, Indiana.

The Laborers were in the national spotlight in 1985, when an Academy Awards “Oscar” was won by a short documentary about Laborer stone carvers at the National Cathedral in Washington.

In 1989, Arthur A. Coia replaced his father as General Secretary-Treasurer.

The 1990s: Rebuilding and re-energized

By the end of the 1980s, the Laborers were regained hope. The Training Funds had matured and were serving thousands of members annually. LECET offered new outreach possibilities for labor-management cooperation and recapturing market share.

With the 1992 election of a Democratic president, Bill Clinton, the Laborers were re-energizing. New organizing initiatives were launched in the mid-1990s. The union went through a traumatic but necessary reform process, renewing democracy and cleansing criminal elements.

National officers also shifted during the decade. In 1993 Arthur A. Coia became General President. James Norwood of St. Louis succeeded him as General Secretary-Treasurer. Sadly, Norwood died of cancer one year later. R.P. "Bud" Vinall of Tulsa, Oklahoma succeeded him. Vinall served until his death in 1998. Carl E. Booker of Indiana completed Vinall's term.

In 1996 union members directly elected their officers. Under a federal consent agreement, the union worked to remove criminal elements from office, putting some local unions under trusteeship. Arthur A. Coia was re-elected by the members nationally, in a federally supervised process. The members also voted to allow convention delegates to select future officers. The union successfully completed the reform process without the federal government taking control of the union.

In 1994 the Laborers initiated an aggressive southern organizing drive, hiring young organizers from the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute. Organizing efforts were held with meat-packing workers in Virginia, Mississippi and North Carolina. The union was successful at Smithfield Packing and Case Farms in North Carolina.

A significant group of workers, the 10,000 strong National Federation of Independent Unions, affiliated with LIUNA in 1997.

The union continued its outreach to public employees, establishing a public employee department. 5,200 Riverside County, California workers joined LIUNA in 1998, along with the Canadian Licensed Practical Nurses Association. Various California hospital workers, from all segments, joined the union. The union held a national public employee conference in St. Louis in 1999. This was the Laborers' first public employee conference since Atlanta in 1974.

In 1999 the Mail Handlers ratified a new contract with the Post Office, winning their biggest wage increase since the 1980s.

2000: Into a new century

As the year 2000 began, President Coia resigned. Terence M. O'Sullivan replaced him as General President. Sullivan is a long-time member of Charleston, West Virginia Local 1353. Sullivan aggressively pushed the union for greater market share and outreach to new workers. On May 1, 2001, General Secretary-Treasurer Booker retired, replaced by Armand E. Sabitoni of Providence, Rhode Island.

Echoing the union's immigrant roots, O'Sullivan marched for immigrant rights in 2000. Both O'Sullivan and Sabitoni were re-elected at the union's 2001 convention.

In 1903 a tiny band of building laborers, mostly hod-carriers, gathered in Washington D.C. to begin a fledging union. A century later 800,000 workers – construction, health care, industrial, postal and public employees -- are united under the Laborers' banner. A union founded on human diversity, open to all workers, expanded from its humble roots to include numerous workers. Pensions, health care and decent wages, all distant dreams of the union's founders, support today's laborers. With a union contract providing justice, workers live in dignity and honor, and with the strength of solidarity, Laborers are laying the foundation for their second century.

Politics: When Laborers Vote, Laborers Win

The Laborers early founders not only negotiated contracts and working conditions with employers, but also educated and informed members about political action.

Local union members, involved in their community, ran for elected office. In 1948 Laborers 264 business agent Leonard Irving won, as a Democrat, Harry Truman's home congressional seat. In 1960, a San Rafael, California Local 209 member, Clem Miller, was elected to the U.S. House. Miller served one term before dying in a tragic accident.

In 1958 international union Representative J.B. McCoy, from Albuquerque Local 16, won election to the New Mexico house. That same year another Local 16 member, James Solomon, was elected Governor of the Laguna tribe in New Mexico.

Laborers have served their local communities in a variety of public offices. Fairbanks, Alaska Local 942 President Ed Norbeck won a seat on the city council in 1957. Austin, Texas Local 790 business agent Charles E. Wright was named to the Texas State Technical Institute in 1971. Ernest Colbert Sr., of New Orleans Local 689, was appointed to the Superdome Commission in 1976. His son, Ernest Colbert Jr., followed his father on the city's City Planning Commission in 1981. Two Laborers Local 362 members, Tom Whalen and Mike Matejka, were both elected to the Bloomington, Illinois city council in 1989. Ammie Murray, Columbia, South Carolina Local 1293 business agent, was the first woman on the Lexington County Board of Education in 1990. In 2000, Glen Forby, a Southern Illinois Laborer, was elected to the Illinois House.

The early union, following the AFL's lead, did not endorse candidates, though it certainly maintained access to elected officials. Political activity was usually left to local unions, but in 1948 the union began encouraging members to register and vote.

In 1955 the Laborers encouraged members to support Federal Highway Program, including prevailing wage coverage.

With the 1964 presidential election the Laborers made their first U.S. endorsement. "*The Laborer*" magazine increasingly emphasized political issues and encouraged members' response and participation. In 1966 the Laborers Political League was established, helping insure members' voice in politics. The union successfully won modification of the Service Contract Act in 1972, insuring rights for Laborers working on federal military bases.

Jack Curran took over LIUNA's political affairs in 1967, guiding the union legislatively and politically for years.

The Laborers are frequent adherents for health and safety, testifying on hazardous substances like lead and asbestos and calling for greater safety regulation.

At the state, provincial or local government level, local unions, district councils and regional offices maintain contact with elected officials, lobby at events and push for legislation to protect Laborers.

Tri-Funds

Integral to the Laborers program is the Tri-Funds, three efforts labor-management efforts that supplement and enhance union and signatory contractor activities. The three Tri-Funds are:

The Laborers-ACG Training Fund**The Laborers Health & Safety Fund of North America****The Laborers – Employers Cooperation & Education Trust**

In the union's early day, Laborers learned their trade "on the job" or through guidance by a family member. In 1950 Kansas City Local 555 members built their own "training center" behind their hall. A series of ladders allowed prospective hod carriers to climb with a load and learn the trade's tricks. Tacoma Local 252 was offering Red Cross safety classes to members in 1952.

Many early training efforts were tied in with safety concerns. In 1964 Utah Laborers worked with their state highway department to certify highway flaggers.

In 1967 with \$2.1 million in seed money from the Laborers union, Jack Wilkinson was named executive director for training and a national training director, Joe Short of Terre Haute Local 204, was named, along with six regional coordinators. Regions were encouraged to establish a check-off fund to support training efforts. A pilot program, funded by the federal Manpower Development and Training Act, was held in a Kansas City quarry in 1967. By 1968 check-off funds were established in Oregon, Washington, Ohio, Indiana, Montana, Utah, Idaho, Alaska and Hawaii. Federal grants enhanced the union's funds.

In 1969 the Laborers – Associated General Contractors (ACG) Training Fund was established. By that year 20 state funds were active. The original program greatly benefited from federal funding, including specialized grants for retraining Vietnam veterans. States and regions began opening training schools, while in New Mexico the Laborers went on the road with a trailer classroom in 1978. In 1971 Laborers-AGC Training completed its first film and held its first national training conference. In 1972 the union hosted three regional OSHA “Train the Trainer” classes in 40-hour OSHA. In 1977 the Laborers piloted their own “Train the Trainer” sessions at the California training school.

Asbestos removal was an early emphasis in training. In 1985 the Indiana school developed a hazardous waste handling program, helping open another field for Laborers to work. In 1985 the program established a permanent home in Pomfret, Connecticut, at the New England Training School. The facilities there allowed the Training Fund to train instructors from other schools, district councils and local unions.

A related training need was literacy skills. In 1988 the Training Fund won a federal VISTA grant, to pilot a literacy program. In 1990 the union released a “Learn at Home” literacy program, on video, featuring cookie mogul Wally “Famous” Amos as host. Two years later the Fund won another federal grant, developing literacy skills for limited English speakers. That same year a Laborers basic skills program, the “Construction Skills Training Program,” was launched.

With a National Institute for Environmental Health Science grant in 1988, the Training Fund initiated a hazardous waste removal program that included certification. Within a year 2,500 workers were being trained annually at six sites.

A long-sought breakthrough for the Fund came in 1994 when the U.S. Department of Labor certified “Construction Craft Laborer” as an apprentice able occupation. Training effort shifted into apprenticeship programs, building toward the day when all Laborers will complete an apprenticeship program. To insure a quality program, in 1999 the Training Fund established the Instructor Development Program, certifying instructors.

National Health & Safety Fund

Cave-ins, falls and other safety hazards have long plagued Laborers. One slip or false move on a job could mean a serious injury or a fatality.

“*The Laborer*” long featured back cover safety messages and these were extensively republished. The magazine also printed articles on silicosis and other hazards. The union also developed a strong relationship with the National Safety Council. In 1962, the union helped found the AFL-CIO Building & Construction Trades Department’s safety committee. The union publicly declared “war on cave-ins” and pushed for federal legislation. This helped lay the foundation for the 1970 Occupational and Safety & Health Act (OSHA). Richard Tupper, a Laborers 74 member, was appointed as the National Safety Council’s first labor department director in 1977.

In 1988 the Laborers established the National Health and Safety Fund, like the training program, a labor-management effort. It was a labor movement first. In that year the Laborers also began offering its own leadership program for rank and file members.

The Health and Safety Fund maintains a trained national staff, along with regional directors, who are able to inspect workplaces for hazards and also offer educational programs. The program works with signatory contractors to reduce safety hazards and

long-term risks, thus lowering insurance costs. Health and Welfare funds are assisted in finding cost-effective means to offer services.

The Health & Safety Fund impacts members at various levels. Training in safe practices protects members, as does long-term research into potential hazards. Family members attend the Health Fairs sponsored by many local programs, an effort initiated by New Jersey Local 172 in 1978. Job site visits by Health & Safety Fund staff not only protect members, but also help contractors cut costs.

Laborers-Employers Cooperation and Education Trust

The Laborers have long had cooperative relations with employers. Many employers first began working as laborers and understand the trade's challenges. A mature relationship meant settling job grievances and negotiating contracts without enduring belligerent relations.

Locals began building better relations with contractors early and contractor representatives were frequent guests at Laborers conventions and events. The St. Louis District Council helped start the local "Construction Industry Joint Conference" in 1959. The Laborers joined the AFL-CIO's Building & Trades in supporting this effort.

As union contractors and members lost market share in the 1970s, new efforts were initiated. In 1984 the Building & Trades compiled materials, encouraging formation of local labor-management committees. These committees were to address competitive issues and help union contractors regain market share. In 1982 the Pennsylvania District Council of Laborers joined with other heavy and highway unions to form a labor-management committee. Representatives from both sides attended educational programs, including rank and file members, initiating a program which regained market share.

LECET was founded in 1989 and the first regional program was established in New England. The initial LECET emphasis was on hazard waste removal. LECET identified jobs, worked with the Training Fund to insure workers were properly trained and built relationships with governmental agencies to meet their requirements. This won jobs for Laborers and contractors in an emerging field.

Since then LECET has expanded nationally, with regional and district council programs. LECET builds relationships with local governments, construction users and contractors. In many areas it conducts public relations campaigns, enhancing the industry's image. It tracks jobs and insures contractors are able to place competitive bids.

One service national LECET has developed and enhanced is computer tracking of jobs. From a rudimentary beginning, it has now developed a sophisticated computer tracking system that allows all levels of the industry and union to follow available jobs and insure union contractors are bidding. LECET has also offered computer training classes across the country, to enhance these efforts.

A union for all workers – the Laborers & Civil Rights

“You must first of all become a united organization, drop your miserable race prejudice, unite your craft and obliterate race, creed and color. By doing so you will become a vast army of true trade unionists, able to give and demand the respect and support of even the most thoroughly organized trades in the building industry.”

AFL organizer Jacob Tazelaar, 1907 Laborers convention

From its founding, the Laborers were a union open to all workers. At the opening 1903 convention, AFL President Samuel Gompers admonished the delegates to “unite in one common brotherhood, regardless of nationality, creed or color.”

In 1903 the United States was a divided nation. Segregation laws returned in the 1890s, denying African-Americans access to jobs and the voting booth. Hispanic workers were limited to low wage work. Native Americans were being herded onto reservations, deprived of their language and culture. Women could not vote and were limited to certain occupations. Asian workers were restricted from U.S. shores, thanks to laws that labor had backed. At Ellis Island thousands of European immigrants were coming ashore. These workers were ethnically divided and quickly exploited, whether in crowded city tenements or isolated mining camps.

The early Laborers were not perfect and sometimes ignored division, but in most cases, the early union and its leaders realized that an effective Laborers union could not be exclusive. An effective union must open its doors to every worker.

Thus Moses Payton of Washington, D.C., an African-American laborer, served on the early Laborers executive board, beginning a tradition of racial inclusion. George H. Taylor, an African-American, was commissioned a Laborers organizer in 1904 by President Herman Lilien. Louis Littlepage, an African-American hod carrier, headed Cincinnati Local 119, inducing his local to join the new Laborers.

In the far southwest, laborers had organized a San Antonio union in 1899 under Luciano Martinez. He convinced this newly organized group to affiliate with the Laborers, beginning a long tradition in the American southwest.

In the early years the Laborers did charter some segregated locals; in some cases, these were ethnic locals. In some cities Italians, Irish or German workers had separate organizations. The early Laborers published the "*Official Journal*" in English, German and Italian. There were constitutional resolutions to also publish union materials in Spanish and French. Early union president Dominic D'Alessandro first drew attention by organizing Boston laborers, Italian immigrants exploited by the "padroni" system of labor contractors.

As the union spread across the nation, it often faced challenges about who could and could not join. In many cases the union took the "practical" routes, but in many cases it encouraged racially inclusive local unions. Famed union organizer Mary "Mother" Jones appeared at a Charleston, West Virginia organizing rally in February 1919, accompanied by African-American Laborers vice-president W.W. Cordell.

When segregation renewed after World War I and the Ku Klux Klan was spreading, the Laborers refused entreaties from white workers to form separate locals. During the 1941 convention the union passed numerous resolutions calling for civil rights and heard from H.L. Mitchell, president of the inter-racial Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

As the Civil Rights era dawned, the Laborers responded. In 1962 when President John F. Kennedy called a conference to end racial discrimination in unions, the Laborers were one of the few organizations that could send an African-American officer to the White

House, Vice-president Robert E. Powell. Powell was also a founding member of the A. Philip Randolph Institute.

Building on the traditions started with Local 93 in San Antonio, the Laborers included Hispanic members, particularly in the western states. When public employees and contract service workers began organizing with the Laborers in the late 1960s in the south and southwest, the union had multi-ethnic staff in the field. The AFL-CIO launched the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA) in 1974. The founding president was Laborer Ray Mendoza. Over ten percent of the founding delegates were Laborers. Los Angeles Local 300 became an organizing powerhouse, bringing diverse trades into the Laborers.

Native Americans also joined the Laborers in the southwest, particularly when power and uranium plants were built in the early 1960s. An early Laborers training effort in 1978 was for Navajos in mine construction. In 1978 the union began organizing Navajo Health Care workers, employees of Indian Health Services. These efforts have spread across the southwest and to Pine Ridge Hospital in South Dakota.

Women came into Laborers ranks in small numbers during World War II. The 1951 convention had three women delegates, Dora Lynn of Metropolis, Illinois Local 1455, Ann Denham, business agent for Tampa, Florida Local 1207 and Gertrude Miller, secretary-treasurer of Shreveport, Louisiana Local 229. As women entered non-traditional fields in the 1970s, the Laborers responded with “Women in Construction” programs at various training schools. Today women are included in new apprenticeship classes.

Today the Laborers are not only proud of an inclusive history, but practicing it throughout the nation. As the union organized and merged with non-construction workforces, the union's diversity increased. In 2000 President Terence M. O'Sullivan marched with immigrant workers, demanding justice and legal rights. That completes a century-long tradition for a union open to all workers.

Laborers building the community

Laborers do not just work for a paycheck – they work for a better life for their community. Local unions have always been extremely generous, helping in emergencies, coaching youth sports and particularly, donating labor to enrich the community.

Laborers have supported the Red Cross. In 1949 Ottawa, Illinois Local 911 set up a “Living Blood Bank,” with members tested for their blood type and available on call. Other locals across the country soon copied this example, particularly Local 66 in Mineola, New York. In honor of Joseph Moreschi’s 25th year as Laborers President, the Laborers in 1952 donated a bloodmobile to the American Red Cross. Christened the “Big Joe,” it was soon cruising the nation’s highways in service.

When fires or disasters struck, Laborers were there. In 1950 Effingham, Illinois Local 695 built a new home for a fire-ravaged family. During the 1993 Mississippi River floods, Laborers along the torrential path helped sandbag their communities. In 1958 Essex, New Jersey Local 472 built a new ambulance station for their community.

Laborers respond in emergencies. Asa Ray Gillette of Kansas City Local 663 saved an inspection engineer from a bridge fall into the icy Missouri River in 1954. Sam Woodson of Mineola, New York Local 66 saved a seven-year-old from a well and was featured on national television on the Ed Sullivan and the Art Linkletter shows in 1957. Two brothers, Joe and Manuel Perez of San Mateo, California Local 389, saved Navy crewmen from a downed plane in 1958.

College scholarships, like the one initiated by Tacoma Local 252 in 1947, have ensured Laborers children have educational opportunities. The Indiana State Council has a long-standing scholarship, as do Pekin, Illinois Local 231 and Cairo, Illinois Local 773.

Laborers have restored historic settings. Laborers Local 1329 stabilized 1890s technology, the world's largest steam pump, in Iron Mountain, Michigan. Trainees from the Kansas City Laborers Training Center helped build the National Farmers Memorial in Bonner Springs, Kansas, in 1989.

In 1954, Frank J. Russo of Laborers 1130 in Modesto, California initiated that city's Little League program. Minneapolis Local 363 member George Todd built a new city park in 1964, which the community named after him. Laborers Local 362 in Bloomington, Illinois won a "Presidential Points of Light" award in 1996 for its numerous community projects, including "Poetry Place," an outdoor space for a low-income school.

During the 1990s the Laborers nationally supported Habitat for Humanity. Over the years the union has also assisted with Dollars Against Diabetes and in the 1960s and 1970s, the "City of Hope" fundraising efforts.

Laborers have also built their communities through direct investment. In Illinois, the Laborers Home Development effort has built and operated numerous housing projects since the 1970s. Nova Scotian local 1115 in Cape Breton launched the "Cape Breton Labourers Development Company, Ltd.," in 1985, building homes for members. In Boston the Laborers and Bricklayers combined that same year to launch the non-profit "Bricklayers and Laborers Non-Profit Housing Company, Inc.," which rehabs and builds new construction.

In some cases, Laborers financial efforts have saved jobs. Cairo, Illinois Local 773 led an employee buy-out of “Waterfront Services Company,” with Laborers in the ownership of river tugs. In 1997, Hamilton, Ontario Local 837 and Tradeport International won the bid to operate the city’s airport, protecting thousands of jobs.

When a community needs help, either with a youth program, a wheelchair ramp, a park or even investment dollars, Laborers invest their dollars, but most especially, their sweat, time and efforts, in their communities.

Organize the unorganized

“As an international union we propose to act along conservative lines, having ever in mind the best interests of our members. We intend to insure a uniform rate of hours and wages throughout the country wherever a local union can be established, and as a potent and far-reaching organization to secure for the weakest of our local unions ample protection at all times against any encroachment upon these hours or deductions from this rate or wages.

“Therefore, with consciousness of the justice and soundness of our position, we appeal to the judgment of our fellow craftsmen, asking them to unite with us in our movement for the cause of organized labor, hoping for the right and justice hereafter which shall secure for us an equal share of the fruits of our labor performed.”

1903, early organizing statement

Organizing is the life blood of any union. For a union to grow and be effective, it must control its work and also reach out to new groups of workers.

The early Laborers realized this. The early union faced rivalry from two competing, non-AFL organization, that claimed to represent laborers. How were 25 laborers, gathered at a first convention, going to build an effective union?

The early union depended upon the AFL to spread. AFL organizers were given a financial bonus for establishing early Laborer locals. This saved the financially strapped, small organization from having to hire its own organizers. AFL organizers like Jacob Tazelaar devoted great time and energy to helping the early Laborers. Early president Dominic D’Alessandro first won attention with his very effective organization of Italian immigrant laborers in Massachusetts. The union printed multi-lingual materials, hoping to reach immigrant workers. Early officers traveled about the country, trying to organize locals and also mediate disputes with contractors, improving conditions for workers.

Once a local union was established, it was that organization’s job to sign up contractors and members, building an effective union. Within a few years of its founding, the Laborers were establishing District Councils. These organizations were able to monitor

work in their area and often sought out new work forces to organize. In 1929, the Laborers voted to center decision-making for local areas in district councils.

In the 1920s the Laborers had a staff of less than 20. During the 1930s Depression the staff and international officers tightened their belts and cut costs. Once the 1935 National Labor Relations Act granted workers union rights, the Laborers responded. President Joseph Moreschi traveled across the country, renewing unions, forming new ones and hiring 30 organizers. The Laborers, which had less than 26,000 members at the depression's depths, came into the 1940s with over 200,000 members.

Post-World War II construction, particularly federal road and dam projects, spurred the Laborers to organize in new regions. Baton Rouge, Louisiana Local 1177 business agent Cecil DeArmond went on the radio in 1949, encouraging area laborers to join the union. Montreal Local 62, using materials in French, English and Italian, organized 1800 new members working for 94 contractors in 1964, through a job by job effort with all the building trades unions. The Laborers International made a concerted decision in 1964 to spread beyond its traditional construction base. The union organized service contract workers on military bases and public employees throughout the nation. This included not only traditional Laborer areas like road workers, but also health care and clerical workers. In 1967 the Laborers General Executive Board voted to concentrate organizing efforts on construction workers, building materials producers and public employees.

Organizing is always a risky business. Some companies see organizers outside their gates as threats. The Laborers often paid a violent price for these efforts, particularly on February 9, 1967, when Laborers Local 1152 business agent Cecyl P. Babineaux was killed with a blast from a 12-gauge shotgun by a company security guard. The unarmed

union representative was on a public road in Lafayette, Louisiana when assaulted. Babineaux was organizing drilling rig operators and builders at the time.

The union fought hard to retain members in the 1980s, when many open shop and double-breasted contractors were spreading. Ft. Lauderdale, Florida Local 938 attracted 300 new members in 1979-1980, by salting jobs and leafleting non-union job sites. Meanwhile the union continued its expansion, winning its first contract with Indian Health Services in 1978.

Most organizing was left to regional or district council staff. At its 1991 convention, the Laborers recommitted themselves to organizing. In 1995, spurred by changes in the AFL-CIO, the Laborers hired new staff. The AFL-CIO was operating its “Organizing Institute,” offering potential organizers a rigorous training. The Laborers hired diverse graduates, directing them to organize meat-packing and health care workers in the South. This was supplemented by VOICE – Volunteer Organizer In Community Empowerment. Rank and file Laborers were encouraged to join the professionals, using their daily experiences to show the benefits of unionization. Laborers Local 362, Bloomington, Illinois and Omaha, Nebraska Local 108 both sent volunteers.

The union also achieved gains with Polish and Yugoslav immigrant asbestos workers in New York and New Jersey, assisted by local unions there.

In 2001, continuing this tradition and knowing the union’s growth depended upon new organizing, the Laborers committed \$9 million dollars and 90 new organizers to the field. The international union also offered to financially assist local unions, district councils and regions in the effort.

Jurisdiction – Doing Laborers work

Jurisdiction is a construction union's lifeblood. Assignment of work, particularly with new technologies, insures a union's survival and work assignments for its members.

In 1903 the AFL gave the Laborers a very specific jurisdiction, particularly in excavation, wrecking and tending of other crafts:

“Wrecking of buildings, excavations of buildings, digging of trenches, piers and foundations, holes, digging, lagging, sheeting of said foundations, holes, and caisson work, concrete for buildings, whether foundations, floors or any other, whether done by hand or any other process, tending to masons, mixing and handling all materials used by masons (except stone setters), building of centers for fireproofing purposes, tending to carpenters, tending to and mixing of all materials for plastering, whether done by hand or any other process, clearing of debris from buildings, shoring, underpinning and raising of old buildings, drying of plastering, when done by salamander heat, handling of dimension stones.”

Maintaining this jurisdiction meant laborers won jobs. The union also sought additional work assignments, either by the AFL or through merger. This was often a fractious and difficult process, and many building trades unions have fought over jurisdiction.

In 1912 the AFL added “Common Laborers employed in the construction of streets, sewers and tunnels” to the union's coverage.

Concrete was an emerging technology in the early 20th century. The Laborers, based on their original jurisdiction, claimed it, although the AFL has chartered a “Cement Workers” union. In 1914 the AFL convention dissolved that the American Federation of Cement Workers, splitting the work between the Operative Plasterers and Cement Masons and the Laborers.

Merger was another opportunity to win new jurisdiction. In 1917 the “International Compressed Air and Foundation Workers” joined the Laborers, followed in 1929 by the “Tunnel and Subway Constructors’ International Union” and finally in 1937 by the “International Union of Rammermen, Flag Layers, Bridge and Stone Curb Setters and

Sheet Asphalt Pavers.” This eliminated much confusion, as these unions had jurisdictions which duplicated the Laborers and led to conflicts.

As shipyards boomed during World War I, many were organized by craft construction trades, doing their respective work on a ship, just like they would on a building. The Laborers claimed their jurisdiction, and after hearings, were awarded it by the AFL in 1919.

Not all jurisdictional appeals were successful. In the 1920s the Laborers claimed the work of Terrazzo Helpers, who assisted bricklayers setting tile, but were denied. In the 1930s the AFL chartered a new Cement Workers union, to organize casting factories. The Laborers appealed this decision and were also denied.

Other mergers have added to the union’s jurisdiction, including the Stone Cutters and the Mail Handlers in 1968. Flaggers were recognized by the Department of Labor as a Laborers craft in 1985.

Jurisdictional disputes often slow jobs, so the Laborers have worked with other building trades unions to try and negotiate conflicts. In 1948 the Laborers joined in establishing the “National Joint Board for Settlement of Jurisdictional Disputes” with other building trades unions. In 1955 the union joined the Operating Engineers, Teamsters and Carpenters in establishing the National Joint Heavy and Highway Construction Committee, which not only sought work, but also mediated disputes.

Not all agreements with other unions are based on conflict. In 1984 the Laborers and Bricklayers signed a joint agreement to protect each others’ interests.

Just like they did with concrete in the early 20th century, the Laborers in the late 20th century pursued intensive training in asbestos removal and environmental clean-up. This created new jobs for Laborers and expanded the union's scope of work. By responding to new technologies, the Laborers have established themselves as a premier construction trade.

Insuring a better life – union benefits

One of the first programs the early Laborers initiated in 1907 was a death benefit, paying \$75 to a member's family when they deceased.

Burial insurance of this type was a valuable benefit, particularly to immigrant workers. Many ethnic groups formed mutual aid societies simply to win this benefit. A death not only meant losing a wage earner, but also a funeral, an expensive item for an immigrant family living paycheck to paycheck.

In 1929 the union increased this benefit to \$200. The benefits were paid directly by the Laborers International, and each year quarterly reports were published, listing all members' families who received the benefit.

Pension and health care benefits spread for union members during World War II. During the war wages were frozen, but the federal government after 1944 allowed companies to grant fringe benefits.

A challenge for the building trades was developing multi-employer pension plans. These programs began, not at the national level, but at the local level. The Chicago District Council launched its program in 1951. By 1964 the Chicago plan had paid out over \$15 million in benefits. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania began its pension plan in 1956, awarding its first check in 1958. Through the 1960s local unions, led by district councils and regions, negotiated benefit plans.

In 1957 the International Union began an educational effort on health, welfare and pension programs. The union surveyed local unions to determine plans already in existence and offered to instruct local unions in choosing competitive bids to insure the best benefits for their members.

At the 1961 convention the Laborers voted to launch a pension plan for full-time union officers, from the local union to the national level. Any local union with officers making more than \$2,000 annually was required to participate.

Benefits could enhance organizing new workers. When the Laborers were attempting to organize Houston, Texas city employees into Local 1347, a 1964 hospitalization package spurred the effort.

With laborers working in multiple areas, portability of benefits was a major problem. In 1967 the Laborers began a major effort to have various plans reciprocate benefits. That same year the Industrial Pension Plan was announced, seeking to serve members not in the construction field.

Not all pension benefits came easily. In Saskatoon, Saskatchewan 1,200 members of Local 890 struck for two weeks in 1968 to win a pension plan.

Other benefits evolved from the local union level. Local 472 opened their own dental clinic in Newark, New Jersey in 1964. The Massachusetts Health and Welfare Fund opened a vision center in Boston in 1973, which it shared with the Teamsters.

Regional benefit packages grew to include not only pensions and health coverage, but also dental and vision coverage. In 1989 the Laborers established a pilot Membership

Assistance Program in the Baltimore-Washington area. This gave members access to drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs.

Benefits enhance good union wages and provide security, not just for the worker, but for the entire family for a lifetime.

By Mike Matejka, Great Plains Laborers District Council