

METAL TRADES DEPARTMENT HISTORY 1908-2012

Theodore Roosevelt was in the waning days of his second presidential term, the Supreme Court had just issued a crippling decision declaring that union boycotts were an illegal restraint of trade, workers had precious few rights. AFL President Samuel Gompers and the rest of the AFL Executive Board attending the Republican National Convention in Chicago were armed with an extensive list of worker grievances. They were infuriated by the party's indifference to their efforts. It was June 15, 1908. The AFL Executive Board closed out a busy session—officially chartering four new departments for the Federation, including the Metal Trades, the Building Trades, the Union Label and the Railroad Department.

Workers and their unions had grown restive over the preceding two decades. Sporadic efforts to raise wages, secure an eight-hour day and to gain some semblance of equality with management were frustrated by indifferent lawmakers and aggressive management organizations. Unions had no legal status, and lawmakers were cavalier about responding to the concerns of Sam Gompers and his colleagues. Gompers launched the AFL's first organized foray into politics in 1906, raising a whopping \$8,200 in political action funds to research the voting records of lawmakers and to circulate "Labor's Bill of Grievances". The point was to focus voters on the activities of a handful of anti-union members of Congress—specifically Republican House Speaker Joseph Cannon (IL), and Republican colleagues John Dalzell (PA), James Kennedy (OH), Sydney Mudd (MD) and James Sherman (NY).

Two years later, Gompers circulated "Labor's Protest to Congress" but narrowed the Federation's activities to the 1908 presidential contest between Democrat William Jennings Bryan and Republican William Howard Taft.

When the Metal Trades Charter was officially issued, IAM President James O'Connell was elected its first president. He was joined by Secretary-Treasurer A.J. Berres, Vice Presidents James W. Kline, Joseph A. Franklin, John R. Alpine, J.J. Hynes, Joseph F. Valentine and W.W. Britton.

MTD's First Affiliates

The Metal Trades Department's first affiliates were:

Amalgamated Sheet Metal Workers' International Alliance; International Association of Blacksmiths; Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Shipbuilders of America; International Federation of Draftsmen's Unions; International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers; International Union of Steam Engineers, International Brotherhood of Stationary Firemen and Oilers; International Brotherhood of Foundry Employees; International Association of Machinists; Metal Polishers, Buffers, Platers, Brass and Silver Workers' International Union; International Moulders' Union of North America; Pattern Makers' League of North America; International Union of Stove Mounters; and United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters of the U.S. and Canada.

The Founding Convention

The Department held its founding convention in Cincinnati, in February 1909.

The concept behind the Metal Trades had incubated since the 1890s, largely on the strength of efforts by the IAM to create unity among the many unions representing workers in the metal trades.

At the IAM's urging, a number of interested organizations held a conference in 1894 where the parties elected Lee Johnson president of the nascent organization, joined by William Anderson as secretary-treasurer and James O'Connell, vice-president. The organization was realigned as the Federated Metal Trades on a national basis during the 1900 AFL Convention, under the leadership of President James Cramer and Secretary L.R. Thomas.

That forerunner of the MTD operated independent of the AFL for the next eight years until the AFL formally chartered it in June 1908 with an aggregate membership of some 600,000 workers.

Presidents of the Metal Trades Department

- John J. O'Connell 1908-1935
- John P. Frey 1935-1950
- James A. Brownlow 1951-1962
- B.A. Gritta 1962-1969
- Maywood Boggs 1969-1971
- Paul Burnsky 1971-1994
- John Meese 1994-2002
- Ronald Ault 2002-2016
- James Hart 2016-Current

War and Peace

Themes of war and peace, struggles between labor and management, striving to maintain the dignity of work and workers—all echo again and again through the Metal Trades first century in existence. The Department has been consistently vigorous and active in support of America's defense against foreign aggression. At birth, the Department's president intervened with the Secretary of the Navy to bring about industrial peace in U.S. shipyards where America was rapidly expanding its Navy to assume a role as a young superpower at sea.

The Department and many of its affiliates were involved in the construction and operations of the Panama Canal—all 41 miles of its course. At a cost of \$380 million, the Canal project employed 70,000 workers over the 10 years it took to complete it in 1914 (5,600 workers died on the job). The Department continued to represent Canal Company workers until the final handoff of the Canal to the Republic of Panama in 1999.

After World War I, as world leaders responded to the calls for disarmament, President Woodrow Wilson initiated a downsizing of America's defense establishment that consisted primarily of a vast Navy arsenal. One of the unexpected consequences of that action was massive unemployment in U.S.

shipyards. The situation became acute as some 10,000 shipyard workers had been laid off by 1922. The situation prompted John J. O'Connell, accompanied by AFL President Samuel Gompers, to convene a meeting with Navy Secretary Edwin Denby and his then assistant secretary, Franklin Roosevelt, to suggest that the shipyard workers be put back to work to dismantle some 120 surplus Navy vessels.

The Department also won an amendment to the 1922 appropriations for the Navy to fend off early "privatization" efforts that threatened the jobs of Naval shipyard workers. The measure stipulated that the Navy's shipyards would have an opportunity to bid on any repairs or reconditioning of vessels in excess of \$5,000. The Department pointed out that despite the effect of that measure, the Federal Shipping Board decided to send the S.S. Leviathan to the private Newport News Shipbuilding Co. for reconditioning at a cost of \$8.2 million instead of permitting the Boston Navy Shipyard to perform the work for 80 percent of that price; a saving that took into account the fact that workers at the Newport News Yard earned 54 cents an hour while the Boston Shipyard's workforce was paid 73 cents an hour.

The Metal Trades Department remained the primary collective bargaining organization for trade unions in shipbuilding and armament manufacturing through the Roaring 20s, confronting many of the same industrial developments that unions in manufacturing faced. One of those issues was the "Taylor System" of "scientific management," the idea that mass production could be achieved by taking all thinking out of the hands of workers. The Taylor system was widely accepted in U.S. factories that had then begun turning out automobiles and led to widespread speedups and abuses on factory floors.

With significant push back from the Metal Trades, Frederick Taylor's ideas were quickly abandoned in the gun factories and shipyards where Metal Trades workers toiled.

Unemployment is another theme that echoed frequently over this past century. Throughout the decade of the 1920s, the federal government sponsored a conference on unemployment. The conference issued its final report in February 1929—six months before the October 24, 1929 official crash of the stock market, widely marked as the beginning of the Great Depression. The report of the conference called on business, labor and government to maintain a balanced economy, warning: "If natural resources, especially the land, are wastefully used; if money in quantity is taken out of production and employed for speculation; if any group develops a method of artificial price advancement which puts one commodity out of balance with other commodities; if either management or labor disregards the common interest—to this extent equilibrium will be destroyed, and destroyed for all." Six months later, on Black Monday, October 24, 1929, equilibrium was blown away and it would not be completely restored until World War II awakened America's productive might. At the height of the Depression, 25 percent of the workforce was unemployed, millions more were earning one third of their pre-depression wage rates.

Sandwiched between the Stock Market Crash and Pearl Harbor came the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt—a complex series of legislative and policy pronouncements, new federal agencies and initiatives all intended to get the U.S. economy breathing again.

The New Deal

After more than a quarter of a century of frustration over corporate domination of government, the New Deal ushered in a period of reform and regulation that began to level the playing field for workers and their unions. With the enactment of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935, the establishment of the National Labor Relations Board and widespread organizing success that followed, the prestige of labor leaders was on the rise. One of the signal moments of that change came in October 1933 when the leaders of the AFL gathered in Washington for its 53rd Convention, taking time out from its proceedings to dedicate the one and only statue in Washington, D.C., honoring a labor leader—the Gompers memorial statue located in a green square at 10th and Massachusetts Ave. But, the agenda for that meeting was far more solemn and serious. Delegates would also grapple with resolutions calling for a boycott of Nazi Germany and a call for a 30-hour work week. The eight-hour day, and 40-hour week had only been in effect for less than a decade.

In its own convention in late September, Metal Trades Department President John P. Frey issued one of the earliest calls for coordinated bargaining: “Careful consideration should be given to the possibilities of entering into joint agreements by our affiliated international unions with an industrial association, for under a system of codes it may prove impractical and perhaps impossible to take up the question of minimum wage rates piecemeal, each international union acting individually.”

Even during the New Deal, when labor acknowledged a strong ally with Roosevelt in the White House, unions still had to fight hard to keep corporate power and greed in check. For the Metal Trades, a good deal of that struggle involved maneuvering around the bureaucracy of the National Recovery Act.

In 1934, the AFL aided Metal Trades President John P. Frey in persuading Roosevelt’s NRA Head Hugh Johnson to keep employers from dominating its decisions to equalize representation on the industrial relations committee for the shipbuilding and repair industry and to assert its independence. The New Deal gave impetus to many labor initiatives during the 1930s. The Department played a key role in one of the most important of those initiatives, the formalization of apprenticeship training with the enactment of the 1938 Federal Apprenticeship and Training Act. Department President John P. Frey was appointed by President Roosevelt as labor’s representative on the first Apprenticeship Committee in 1937 in advance of the passage of the legislation.

America’s Economic Recovery

America’s economic recovery was hastened as the world teetered on the brink of war. And, the Metal Trades leaders were determined to assure an uncertain nation that its affiliates would maintain its consistent position in support of the national defense. In an official statement issued on June 20, 1940—18 months before Pearl Harbor—the Metal Trades declared: “When the nation entered the World War in 1917, these international unions gave their pledge to give every possible support to the nation in the winning of the war.

Their record during this period is evidence of how loyally and patriotically that pledge was honored. “In the present national emergency these international unions again pledge their loyal, active and cooperative support to the nation in the effort to speed production required for national defense.

“These international unions pledge themselves to the nation with an understanding of their responsibility to contribute their full share to the nation’s defense and the protection and perpetuation of these institutions of freedom which are now menaced by totalitarian powers.”

By December 7, 1941, America’s shipbuilding industry was bustling as they constructed Liberty Ships as part of the Lend Lease Act intended to fend off Germany’s aggression against the British. Labor’s commitment to wartime production was critical to the eventual Allied victory over Japan and Germany.

Labor’s role was symbolically recognized with the christening of three Navy Ships in the name of labor leaders. The first of that line was the USS Henry Miller, named after the first president of the IBEW in 1943. The Miller was torpedoed off the coast of Gibraltar a month before the War in Europe ended. The Navy also launched the USS Joseph S. McDonagh, honoring a former electrician at the Brooklyn Navy Yard who was the Secretary-Treasurer of the Metal Trades Department from 1940 until his death in 1945. After World War II, a class of destroyer tenders was commissioned in honor of AFL President Samuel Gompers.

The Metal Trades has been the union representing perhaps the most overlooked of America’s heroes—the men and women who helped develop America’s nuclear capability in the Manhattan Project, and the Cold War veterans who followed in their footsteps as the secrets of the atom were plumbed. In the process, many of these workers had their lives shortened and their health compromised. The Metal Trades Councils that were formed to give these workers a voice on the job, adequate wages and benefits, added health and safety protections, pensions and employment security remain some of the strongest and most effective in our Department— the Atomic Trades and Labor Council at Oak Ridge, the Albuquerque Metal Trades Council, the Metal Trades at the Pantex Plant, Metal Trades Council at Fernald Ohio, the Hanford Metal Trades Council. These are the vanguard of labor representation in the nuclear industry and they have proven the great value of labor’s fundamental commitment to solidarity.

New challenges continue to arise and new leadership will look back on the legacy of this organization for inspiration and direction. Our pledge is to maintain the strength and commitment of the Metal Trades Department to sustain its mission to serve and represent the working men and women of the Metal Trades. Most importantly, we will remain true to the charge of those who went before us: to continue to be a vigorous and aggressive advocate for our affiliates and their members. We will continue to honor the giants on whose shoulders we stand today.