

ORGANIZING FOR POWER IN CONSTRUCTION

Through years of struggle, the labour movement in Toronto has secured the highest level of construction unionization in North America. Attaining this unique status was never easy, with many setbacks along the road as well as victories. This case study details one key organizing drive – the house wiring electricians who dramatically raised their standard of living - and their standards of work. Their victory was one step in a long journey that helped to secure the power of construction unions in greater Toronto, even as the building trades were in retreat across North America.

Construction is, by definition, precarious work. People come to a jobsite, apply their energy and skills, and when they finish, move onto the next job. In some parts of the world, tradespeople are well paid and highly respected, in other places they are migrants with paltry wages and few rights.

In greater Toronto where the industry has relied on generations of immigrants to provide its workforce, the labour movement has changed lives of thousands of workers who have come from every part of the world to apply their skills and build a future together.



CONTEXT

The Building trades unions in North America trace their history over more than a century of economic booms and busts. After 1945, the postwar “social contract” between capital and labour was reflected in the growing strength of labour, and in Canada the vast majority of industrial, commercial and institutional (ICI) and infrastructure projects were built union. But the construction workforce dynamics was different from other blue-collar jobs - the concept of workplace seniority has never been the norm in the trades. To this day, union members keep their jobs based on productivity and personal relations with the company owner or supervisors, and when laid off they rely on the union hiring hall to send them to the next job.

Greater Toronto experienced an ongoing construction boom since the end of the Second World War, fuelled by steady immigration, land speculation and a highly innovative development industry. Unions had a strong presence in the ICI sector, in utilities and some heavy construction. Like many other cities in North America, this was seen as a “union town” for the skilled trades. The large commercial developers and general contractors were bound to Toronto Building Trades Council (BTC) Working Agreement that obliged them to use union members and union subcontractors.

But the massive wave of Italian immigrants suffered from severe exploitation in other sectors of the industry. In the Hoggs Hollow tragedy on March 17th, 1960, five young Italian men were buried alive in a sewer tunnel project run by a company ignoring regulations and cutting corners. Their deaths became the last straw for a workforce that was the subject of constant precarity, mistreatment and wage theft.



Quilt panorama at the York Mills Subway station memorializes five victims of Hoggs Hollow tragedy

It sparked an uprising in the Italian community to demand safe workplaces and conditions with dignity. Union organizing was the answer, and while a first attempt at striking the industry failed, in 1961 the Landsdowne Theatre became the site of almost daily meetings as angry workers spread across the city to shut down residential jobsites. There were hundreds of arrests, and Labourers Local 183 leader John Stefanini was sentenced to six months in jail. But their courage did pay off – the Ontario government soon commissioned Harold Goldenberg to investigate conditions in the industry. His recommendations resulted in the first Construction Safety Act and new labour laws that made organizing easier.



Over the next decade, a majority of the trades became unionized in high-rise apartment buildings, and in 1969 an industry-wide shutdown led to an agreement between the Building Trades (BTC) and the Metro Toronto Apartment Builders Association (MTABA). In 1971 Labourers Local 183 became the

allemployee union for high-rise concrete forming and was also recognized by the MTABA. But low-rise subdivision construction was still mostly unorganized.

UNION BUSTING ACROSS BORDERS

In the 1970's a determined effort by rightwing business forces in the U.S. started to challenge union predominance. They challenged any pro-union bidding policies for either industry or government projects. A key tactic was for unionized contractors to set up a non-union arm to perform work where there was no requirement for union standards. "Double-breasting" soon spread across the U.S. and into the province of Alberta, and as unions lost ground, the employers demanded wage cuts and concessions.

The Alberta conservative government introduced new labour laws during a dramatic downturn of its oil-based economy. That allowed a 25-hour industrywide lock-out in 1984 to instantly render all construction contracts invalid. Workers were offered their jobs back by new "double-breasted" companies at wages far lower than they had been earning. Many were so desperate that they went back to the same jobsite for wages of \$12/hour where they had been earning \$18 before.



Alberta union members march to demand labour law reform in 1987

At the same time, the right-wing British Columbia government took advantage of high unemployment to attack union power in the industry. Despite fierce resistance on projects like Expo 86, solidarity among the trades eventually crumbled and union density plummeted.

In 1987, an upturn in the Alberta economy gave hope that tradespeople could regain what had been lost. Walkouts took place across Edmonton, and for weeks unofficial picket lines shut down production. But the refusal of the major employers to budge on their non-union status prevailed. Men went back to work, while the contractors hired consultants from the U.S. to advise on how to stay "union-free".

Ontario unions were determined to learn from the fate of their colleagues in western Canada. In the 1988 round of provincial bargaining the key civil trades – carpenters, labourers, ironworkers and operating engineers - united to demand new language around a dangerous loophole that was being exploited by employers – general contractors operating as a "construction manager" to avoid their union obligations.

The unions urged their members to think about what was happening in the west, and despite the employers' offer of \$3/hour increase, strike votes came in at 90%. The civil trades were able to win vital contract language that closed the loophole and preserved union security in the ICI sector.

BOOM AND BUST

Economic cycles are a reality of our world - every real estate boom eventually ends - and in the early 1990s the construction market collapsed across North America. Suddenly tradespeople who had earned good wages all their lives were running out of unemployment insurance and faced losing everything they had. Bankruptcies skyrocketed and the hiring hall lists grew by the thousands.

In Toronto, the Building Trades made the difficult decision. Not only would they fight to defend every inch of traditional work, but they would also focus on organizing non-union contractors as well. This contrasted with most jurisdictions in North America, where the unions retreated to the “higher ground” of big industrial or commercial jobs.

Picket lines, rallies, and alliances with key employer associations allowed the trades to fend off the wholesale union-busting that devastated much of the country. With an NDP government in place at Queen’s Park, the brutal legislative assault on unions that swept across the country did not occur in Ontario.

But people were desperate for work, and unions were hard pressed to maintain their wage standards. Nowhere was this more true than in low-rise housing. Major developers had long-standing arrangements with the building trades for high-rise apartment construction. Even though subdivision housing was dominated by many of the same land developers, the labour force dynamics were much different.

Only a few unions had a strong foothold in low-rise housing – most importantly Labourers (LiUNA) Local 183. Its members installed basements, drains, brickwork and most wood framing after a long jurisdictional war with the Carpenters. Drywall was organized by Carpenters Local 675, taping by the Painters Union, and heating systems by Sheet Metal Workers Local 285. After an intense organizing drive, the Plumbers Union Local 46 secured a historic collective agreement in 1986. Shinglers had an independent association that upheld piecework rates for roofing, and bricklayers were in a separate Canadian union. The electricians tried to get a foothold in housing but were defeated.

As the 90’s recession dragged on, prices were cut at every level. Subcontractors would bid on

a number of houses, get the job, and when their work was finished the developer would offer less money than agreed. There was little recourse. Unionized trades struggled to maintain the rates set in collective agreements, but workers without unions were constantly losing out.

There was resistance, from wildcat strikes to organized walkouts to try to force the industry to stabilize prices. In 1995, just as work started to pick up, a massive rupture occurred when a number of staff representatives from the Carpenters Union switched over to Local 183 and an interunion raiding war ensued. LiUNA informed the builders that it would soon represent all trades in the low-rise sector, and pulled out of the Building Trades Council. The dispute brought new attention to the labour dynamics of house-building industry, and the plight of non-union electricians came to the fore.

ELECTRICAL WORKERS

IBEW Local 353 represented nearly all major electrical contractors in greater Toronto, and had a lock on high-rise residential construction that derived from the BTCMTABA agreement with apartment builders. But in low-rise housing, there were dozens of non-union contractors competing for work from the key developers. Many were second generation immigrants, primarily Italian, and their crews were often drawn from the same communities. They were required to have a Master Electrician’s licence to operate the business, but few of their employees had the formal commercial Electrician’s Certificate of Qualification, and some only installed the wires but did no connection. Many housing trades were paid on piece-work rather than an hourly rate, including in union agreements.

House-wiring employees had seen their wages slip during the downturn, but most felt there was no

alternative but to wait for better times. By 1995, the market was turning around, but they were still mired in cut-throat price competition while across the sector other workers were taking action. Shinglers struck to keep their piecework rates, bricklayers went out to demand increased rates, and the BTC established multi-union flying squads to reach out to unrepresented workers.

Joe Fashion, the Business Manager of IBEW Local 353, had tried earlier to interest the provincial IBEW body to initiate residential organizing a few years earlier, but could not get support. The record-high jobless levels meant that members were hesitant to welcome more people into the union to compete for the few jobs available. But by 1996 leaders of the other unions in housing

came forward to urge the IBEW to bring in unrepresented electricians instead of risking them joining LiUNA.

Fashion planned an approach that would respond to the frustration of the housewiring workers while avoiding the mistakes of the previous attempt. In June 1996 Local 353 gained the approval of the provincial IBEW body to hire two organizers. Barry Stevens was active in the local union and an experienced NDP campaigner. Perry Speranza was a rank-and-file member with the charisma to connect to ordinary workers. They worked as a team along with rank-and-file leaders to help bring about a union voice for over a thousand electrical workers.

THE ORGANIZER'S STORY

A RECOLLECTION BY BARRY STEVENS

We didn't know exactly how many workers made their living wiring houses or how many legitimate companies were in the market. The first week we toured as many housing developments as possible, driving through construction sites at low speed trying to find workers. When we learned that wiring could not be installed in a house until the roof was shingled, electricians became easier to find. However, none of the contractors' vans were marked with identifiable signage. Most of the sites were easy to enter because the roads were already in place and, with so much traffic going in and out during the day, we went mostly unnoticed.

We created a letter of introduction that would be either handed out or stapled to the service entrance in the basement of a house that hadn't been wired. We also posted the wage package

for the residential plumbers so electrical workers would know what to expect in union benefits. As time went on, we created more pieces of literature, and concentrated on collecting names and phone numbers.

We soon realized that many of the "electricians" technically under licensing regulations were, in fact, not electricians. A large number of workers did not have licenses and apprentices were not registered with the Ministry. A key decision was to work with local union and our Joint Apprenticeship Council to set up future training. It was important to make sure that, once organized; workers would not be treated as second-class electrical workers.

A decision was made not to begin certification applications until there was a critical mass of

cards and companies signed. The workers did not want to join if only a few companies were certified. For one month we collected names and phone numbers during the day and made calls at night. This meant long days from six in the morning till nine at night, and on the weekends. Finally, on July 7th, a meeting was called at IBEW Local 353's union hall.

THE FIRST MEETING

The union invited a Butch Bisio from the Shinglers and Sheetmetal Local 285's Lou Petricca, so that those who attended could see that it was possible to have a strong union in the housing sector. Fifty electrical workers showed up for the meeting. The organizers outlined the goal of unionization, but it was the speech from Butch Bisio of the Shinglers that really got people excited. He said "... if a bunch of roofers could have a union, why can't you?" The electricians jumped out of their seats and wanted immediately to sign cards. The drive was on.

In the following weeks more cards were signed. Word was getting out and it was a positive message. In August, a meeting was held with several of the more influential contractors along with Local 353's Business Manager Joe Fashion, Eryl Roberts of the Electrical Contractors Association of Toronto (ECAT), and John Cartwright of the BTC. The purpose was to explore the implications of the union drive, and to see if the companies would be open to the kind of positive approach that existed with unionized electrical contractors in other sectors. Local 353 made it clear that it was committed to organizing house-wiring in the face of employer resistance, and to call in the BTC to deal with any pushback from developers. The discussion was polite but non-committal.

At the next worker meeting 100 people attended. Behind the scenes, the workers from

Riviera Electric requested a meeting just for them. This was a tough shop to crack. They were a very tight group. One of the problems was that some of the workers many years ago had been organized and then "cast adrift," leaving them bitter. That feeling had to be corrected. We met 14 workers that evening and they signed 13 cards. The next day we met a few more who couldn't attend and six more signed cards.

THE FIRST VICTORY

I wanted to jump-start this organizing drive. It is important to create a buzz – to show that the union is strong and active. We applied for a certification vote for Riviera Electric on August 15th. On August 19th, we applied for both Proto and Hilton Electric. The next day, application was made for Tam and Internationale Electric. On Friday, August 22, the vote for Riviera Electric was held. Both sides had some voting challenges. We challenged any unlicensed worker or unregistered apprentice that we felt was not with the union. The company was certified by a vote of 15 to 4. It was our first company. Victory!



New Local 353 members at Tam Electric with Perry Speranza, Barry Stevens and Joe Fashion

Other votes followed in quick succession. Often the numbers did not reflect the number of workers at a shop. Licensed electricians were deciding the fate of unlicensed and unregistered

apprentices. The union succeeded 9 to 2 at Proto. The next day it was Internationale – 6 to 0, and Hilton – 4 to 0. The following day, Tam conceded to a 29 to 4 vote. The day after, August 29th, we had a vote with Discovery Electric. They had a lawyer present and they challenged over half the employees. The box was sealed and an opening day was set. That same afternoon, Ragno Electric voted overwhelmingly to support the union by a 19 to 5 vote. Premier Electric was a close vote of 5 to 3 but we knew we had a solid five. The “icing on the cake” was on September 9th when the Discovery box was opened and we won 15 to 1. October 3rd, 1996, we lost our first vote to JAK – 5 to 10. That same afternoon, we counted the votes for Galmar Electric at the Labour Board. We won the vote count by one vote -18 to 16.

LOCAL UNION 353			
INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD OF ELECTRICAL WORKERS			
RESIDENTIAL SECTOR ORGANIZING			
VOTES HELD AS OF SEPTEMBER 13, 1996			
AUGUST 23	RIVIERA	15-4 79%	FOR THE UNION
AUGUST 26	PROTO	9-2 82%	FOR THE UNION
AUGUST 27	HILTON	4-0 100%	FOR THE UNION
AUGUST 27	INTERNAZIONALE	4-0 100%	FOR THE UNION
AUGUST 28	TAM	29-4 88%	FOR THE UNION
AUGUST 29	RAGNO	19-4 83%	FOR THE UNION
AUGUST 29	DISCOVERY	15-1 94%	FOR THE UNION
SEPTEMBER 13	PREMIER	5-3 63%	FOR THE UNION
VOTES HELD TO DATE 8, WON BY THE UNION 8			
100% FOR THE UNION			
NOW IT'S YOUR TURN GALMAR!			
DON'T BE LEFT BEHIND!			
STAND TOGETHER!			

There was a pressure among some shops and workers to have a strike. They wanted a contract with raises and a health plan and were tired of waiting. We had a large number of companies signed up but we still had work to be done to build a more powerful organization. The newly

formed steering committee, consisting of leaders from key companies, still met on a regular basis. We were preparing for an organizing rally on October 23rd. An uneasy momentum is building. And we have a job action scheduled for October 25th. We find that if we can shut down a jobsite for a day, it sends a message and it shows the members that they have power.

JUST THE FACTS

Over 200 low-rise electricians attended the meeting. One of our tools was a flip chart presentation (this was before PowerPoint). A lot of workers were led to believe that if they got raises, it would price them out of the market. It was our job to dispel those fears, which we did with clear facts.

	TOWNHOUSE A	TOWNHOUSE B
Average Cost	\$150,000 Material cost fixed	\$150,000 Material cost fixed
Hours to complete wiring	24 hrs	24 hrs
Wage	Average hourly wage \$15-\$18/hr	Proposed Union Rate \$30/hr
Total labour Cost	\$18/hr x 24 hrs \$432	\$30/hr x 24 hrs \$720
Cost difference \$288 or .192% of the Cost of the Townhouse. Not even significant!		

Eventually, the workers at organizing meetings would ask for the flipchart presentation as it really drove home their argument for better wages. We never talked negatively about their employers. All we ever asked for was fairness and this really resonated with the workers.

Through the Provincial Ministry of Labour, we resurrected the Domestic and Rural Electrician's License. This is for wiring houses and barns. It requires less formal education to achieve and makes it possible for workers in the low-rise industry to finally get a license. Many did not have a license because they had not had the formal training of a more conventional electrical worker in the ICI sectors. Using a Notary Public and employment records, we were able to calculate the hours in the trade that qualified them to receive a license. This was the first time many of these workers would be getting credit for their acquired electrical skills.



Sometimes a sense of humor helps. Union T-shirt's cheeky slogan – in a dog-eat-dog world, IBEW rules!

On November 20th, contract negotiations began. The contractors had agreed to use the ECAT as their bargaining agent. Several low-rise workers were put on the unions' team. This was important to give them a voice and empower them. Organizing doesn't stop during the negotiations. the Labour Board has convened a hearing concerning our unfair labour complaint against JAK. We called nine witnesses, and in August got a favourable ruling resulting in certification.

THE FIRST CONTRACT

Finally, in February a contract is agreed upon. We had always talked of a \$30 total package but were forced to accept \$29.75. Now we have a concrete organizing tool to use. We were now losing a few votes in smaller companies but still winning most. We placed ads in the Toronto Sun looking for leads. One company threatened me with a motorcycle gang. I laughed at the absurdity.

We were having some success shutting down sites for a day to show union strength. Most of the workers from other trades cooperated because their representatives showed support and we always gave the other unions a "heads up" as to our intentions. The newly organized contractors were now picking up more work, so we began stripping the licensed workers from non-union companies. This had an effect of weakening the amount of work a non-union company could bid and, at the same time, exposed them to using unqualified workers which, in turn, risked investigation by the Ministry of Labour.



Proto Electric workers and owners after unionizing

It was the summer of 1997, and we were still at it. The union added another organizer, Tony Chiapetta, who was one of the key rank and file leaders and knows the sector well. We are now at a stage where we feel comfortable trying some “top down” organizing by putting pressure on owners. The unionized companies are now gaining more work because they can offer a stabilized workforce and a guarantee that they can supply enough labour to the developer to keep their project on schedule.

One company, Panson Electric, is owned by a former union member and has secured work with a major builder. Our plan is to picket the sales offices on Saturday and Sundays with leaflets telling potential buyers that these homes are not being wired by licensed electricians. The builder is very upset, and pressures the owner to talk. The workers want to join, and he is afraid that some of his key employees will leave for union shops. Eventually Panson Electric signed the union agreement.

In the following months the number of union companies grew, and we now represent 90% of the work in greater Toronto. However, this didn't mean our

work was done. It will never be done. Some companies will go out of business, others will consolidate. New companies will form with many of them exploiting immigrant workers. New developers will enter the market and will also exploit workers. Organizing can never stop.”

“I remember one worker who told me he had voted for the union, not because of the money but because of the healthcare plan. He and his partner had a small prematureborn baby who needed medication costing over \$400 a month. They were barely able to make ends meet and were living in a basement apartment. Later, when we met again, the union changed their lives dramatically. They now had their own home and a healthy child”.

Barry Stevens



Barry Stevens receives award from NDP leader Jack Layton

THE BIGGER PICTURE OF SOLIDARITY

The IBEW organizing in housing was taking place during the early years of the Mike Harris Conservative government as it unrolled its Common Sense Revolution. The Conservatives quickly gutted labour rights, making it far harder to organize workplaces, and cancelled over 200 social housing projects. While many construction workers may have voted for Harris and his promise of tax cuts, they did not anticipate how swiftly he would implement a deeply antiunion agenda.

The labour movement soon decided to mobilize a series of city-wide general strikes. On October 25th, 1996, the entire city of Toronto came to a halt as pickets went up at union workplaces, transit did not move and most offices closed. The BTC organized picketing to shut down work at all major jobsites in Toronto. The next day 250,000 people marched on Queen's Park. Working class solidarity was on full display.

MULTI-UNION ORGANIZING

The IBEW was never alone in the momentum to bring more residential workers into unions. The BTC was driving a strong, co-ordinated effort to raise union density in every sector, particularly in housing. Multi-union organizing crews helped affiliates gain new members, and a new training program designed by Jeff Grabelsky of the AFL-CIO Building Trades called COMET (Construction Organizing Membership Education and Training) was being taught to activists in every local. As the consequences of union-busting in western Canada started to be understood, Toronto workers were more determined than ever to protect their unions.

The BTC started to widely distribute flyers in English, Italian and Portuguese. Attention was paid to getting pro-union stories in the ethnic media,

emphasizing the legacy of immigrant organizing in past decades. In 1999 it held a special organizing conference to plan the next stage in building local power. The keynote speaker was Richard “Cowboy” Compton, the international director of organizing for the Sheet Metal Workers. By the end of the conference, he turned to his hosts with these words: ***“I don’t know why you brought me up here to talk – you guys should be going out across my country to explain how you won this unmatched level of unionization in our industry.”***

CONCLUSION

This story is not just relevant to construction trades, but speaks to the urgent challenge of union density and organizing. Most Canadian union members never “joined” a union – they got a job at a workplace where others had built a union decades before. As the modern economy changes, sector-wide strategies are crucial to build worker power.

Barry Stevens points to contributing factors to Local 353’s success:

“First, construction had just started to recover from a devastating recession in the early 90’s. All workers had been marginalized and pushed down economically. For most, the only way up was to join a union. They were ready for change.

Second, IBEW Local 353 leadership under Joe Fashion saw the need to curtail the growth of non-union contractors, as the low-rise sector was seen as an entry level into the electrical industry. The union was willing to invest time, money, and take political risks to tackle that challenge.

Third, it needed a focused campaign to entice workers to join. It was important that within every shop the union found a leader who was confident and unafraid.”

In 2017 the Ontario Changing Workplace Review carried out by Michael Mitchell and John Murray published a comprehensive study of labour relations in Ontario, and made recommendations to address the growth the “fissured workplace”, where most new jobs were being created outside of single large industrial or public sector employment spaces. For a brief period of time legislation won through Bill 148 gave Ontario some of the best labour law in the continent, but its repeal was one of the first acts of the Conservative government elected in 2018.

As the labour movement tries to build the capacity to represent people in a rapidly changing economy, the lessons from this sector are particularly relevant. Local 353 is part of a unique community of unions which represent workers in low-rise housing in greater Toronto. Reflecting an industry full of people with strong opinions, they haven’t always agreed on every issue. But together their efforts have made an immense difference in the lives of thousands of working families in greater Toronto.

Authored by Barry Stevens and John Cartwright



IBEW 353 at Labour Day - solidarity across generations