What relation "being plastered" has to the plastering trade is a question that doesn't seem to add up at first glance. But looking at what has been happening to the plaster trade on our watch makes one wonder.

As several contractors pointed out, we have a trade and technology that is dying out and the loss is really to the architect, the owner and anyone in the construction industry who wants to have options and is regularly led to the lowest quality, cheapest and easiest solution because that is all that is left. So were we asleep at the wheel or is this really a DUI situation?

When 29 contractors from around the country were asked what was the biggest problem they faced in doing plaster work, the only ones who did not say "lack of skilled personnel" were the five who no longer did plastering—three of them sub it out, even to out-of-staters, and the other two don't touch it at all. A Texas contractor spoke for several others when he said, "The lathing trade is even more in a
Do we have to plaster ourselves into a corner so that drywall is the only option left for interiors?

state of demise and in need of people than plastering. We’re at the end of a generation that was trained as lathers by the union, and in the last 15 years there’s been so much EIFS work that there’s been no need for metal lathing. But now there’s some demand and not enough mechanics trained with lather skills.”

An Idaho contractor echoed an Indiana man when he made the same point about the plaster technology being lost and a demand therefore not being filled: “We’re looking at a large, performing arts-theater project now that has very intricate shapes in the ceilings and the walls for sound reflecting and absorp-

The point is not that we should do away with drywall and return to plaster. As several contractors point out, “Plaster is such a monster—there are so many variables and things that can go wrong,” (Arizona) . . . “It requires a lot of training before one becomes a qualified journeyman,” (California) . . . “If the sun is shining, it’s going to be wavy, if it’s raining, it’s going to mess it up, and if it’s too cold, that’s a problem, too,” (Florida) . . . “It typically costs two or three times more, mostly for labor,” (Indiana) . . . “[wallboard] is easier and cheaper,” (Alabama).

Thank goodness for drywall then. But do we really have to plaster ourselves into a corner so that drywall is the only option left for interiors?

How did things get so far south?

It’s easy to say, “Well, train some people,” but there may be some problems with this pat answer. Sixteen contractors stated that the trade is dying because there is no demand for it. You cant recruit or train someone into a trade that has almost no demand and that is seasonal, too, as some contractors point out.

“The problem is that, without the workload, you’re going to have a hard time training people to do plaster because they cant keep busy and make a living that way.” (Indiana)

“It is hard to get trained laborers because the kids coming into the profession are
being told by their peers and elders: ‘Don’t bother getting into plaster because it’s a dying profession.’” (Maryland)

“If a young guy comes into your office and says, ‘I’d really like to get in the trades, and I think I’d like to be a plasterer or a carpenter,’ it’s really hard to look him in the eye and say, ‘Well, you really ought to be a plasterer because it’s a better deal for you,’ when you know that the carpenter stands a really good chance of working 12 months a year.” (Illinois)

**Work Up a Sweat? Huh?**

On the other hand, there is an additional problem that irks no less than 11 of the contractors surveyed: the disappearance of the work ethic and unwillingness of people coming into the labor force to roll up their sleeves and do actual hard, physical work

“The lack of work ethics and some of the personal characteristics of some of the tradesmen are a problem. It’s very difficult to find an experienced crew of steady, professional people, especially since the demise of interior plaster.” (Indiana)

“I used to train people when I was out in the field. But by the time I left the field, those people were already out of the business because it’s tough work. I don’t think it’s the kind of world they had in mind for the rest of their lives, so they jumped ship.” (Colorado)

“Most of the younger crowd would rather sit and play Nintendo and go to college than put in any hard work” (Illinois)

“A lot of young people don’t want to get into that trade because they don’t want to work that hard.” (Indiana)

“Workers don’t want to work nowadays. What people want to do is work two or three days a week, go home and have beers. The work ethic in this country has been lost among the younger generations. Of course, wage scales have some impact, but that doesn’t determine the work ethic and care in your trade. When
I entered the trade, carpentry, drywall, construction, were considered noble professions. For those aged 30 and below, these jobs are only a way to make a buck. The pride one has in creating a building isn’t there for them.

“They say it’s our fault as we raised them. But a lot of different circumstances have created this lack of interest in manual labor. The Internet for one, and government regulations that prevent anyone from working a minor in construction during the summer, and no morals or work ethic being taught at school. So the kids sit at home and watch TV or get into drugs.” (Louisiana)

There are things that can be done about this issue, which are out of the scope of
Unions can contribute by re-instituting their training and apprenticeship programs.

this analysis, but the fact remains that not everyone joining the work force is money motivated or a pantywaist amateur. More to the point is, what can we do, as an industry, that is within our own power to control, to improve the volume and quality of people joining the trades. Four contractors fingered the unions as a resource that needed to change their operating basis.

Unions Come Back!

Plaster has a niche in high-end buildings where quality is more of an issue than price, where achieving the purpose is senior to the purse. That means we do need to put some attention on training plasterers. If the market is not sufficient to bear single-hatted plasterers, then how about making some double-hatted ones?

Unions can contribute to the motion by re-instituting their training and apprenticeship programs. They can merge with plasterer unions (over the bodies if necessary of died-in-the-wool, “wallboard is a downgrade” plasterers who are still having trouble acknowledging that they are beat). And maybe they can work out how to unionize residential so as to raise standards again.

As an Illinois contractor explains, “The plasterers had an option way back when to accept drywall as part of their work, and they passed it up (as far as the union trades are concerned). They thought it was cheap and would never last and obviously that was a pretty poor move on their part. As a result, drywall ate them alive, which impacted us.

“I really think the plasterers need to merge with one of the other trades, such as painters or carpenters. In the past, other trades have merged voluntarily with other unions as they came into financial difficulties or found themselves unable to compete for some reason. The plasterers have two choices: They can either do it voluntarily under controlled circumstances, or they can wait until it’s too late and the economy and business pressures and constraints push the issue.

“We basically have two age groups of plasterers in this area—those approaching retirement age, and those in their 20s and 30s. The guys who are in their late 50s know the interior and the conventional plaster very well and are very resis-
tant to the EIFS world. The younger guys are barely familiar with the EIFS world and don’t know a lot about interior or conventional plaster. Unfortunately, because of the huge age span and difference in how those two groups approach like, they don’t seem to get along too well.

“There’s not a lot of training or apprenticeship going on, either. Every other trade I work with has a functional apprenticeship program that solicits input from contractors and encourages our support.”

“The demise of the unions means the building trades have lost their apprenticeship programs and our pride of craftsmanship philosophy,” adds a Texan.

Another Illinois contractor agrees: “Detail work may well be on the way out because it is not a trade that unions actively teach. The writing is on the wall, and plaster could die out if attention is not paid to it immediately. Either the Carpenters or the Plasterers unions need to integrate it into their training.”

“It is very hard to create in a non-union environment,” continues the Texan. “There’s just no reference point. When an apprentice came from a union program, you felt he was probably going to stay with the program, and he really didn’t have much choice. Nowadays, in the non-union environment, a guy can come to work for you and stay a couple of weeks before going across the street and telling your competitor he’s a journeyman. That happens a lot!”

“Our work force is not trained like it
used to be,” adds a Californian, “because the non-union market has really taken over, adversely affecting the plaster industry. From Georgia to the West, residential is all non-union now, and standards have slipped.”

**Do-It-Yourself**

Any company can set up its own training program—it’s not necessary to rely on unions, as a contractor from Idaho reports. “There are certainly those who want the quick buck and to take as much as they can right now without looking at the long term. But we’ve been running our own apprenticeship program with 25 to 50 apprentices in any given year for the last eight years. So there are definitely people who want to be trained and who have the patience and willingness to stick with it.”

Three other contractors mentioned how they were using any opportunity for plaster jobs to pass on the know-how of their trained plasterers and thereby expand the skills of their young EIFS mechanics. “It takes a lot more skill than the ‘painting by numbers’ of EIFS,” according to a Louisiana contractor. “I’m confident this strategy will work,” retorts a contractor from Iowa, “but I’m an eternal optimist.”

Whether optimist or pessimist, the more contractors and union members who take it upon themselves to keep the technology alive and the product available, the better off we will all be, and we can take a group win turning around that DUI rap with some good old DIY.

**About the Author**

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