A one-of-a-kind seminar, conducted in Houston in late June under the auspices of the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industries (AWCI) brought together key AWCI and union leaders to discuss the future of union contracting in North America.

The seminar, moderated by Engineering News-Record Senior Editor Jay Kraker, was attended by Melvin H. Roots, General President, Operative Plasterers’ and Cement Masons’ International Association; Sigurd Lucassen, 1st General Vice President, United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America; Robert C. Welch, Assistant to the General President, International Brotherhood of Painters and Allied Trades; James Sheets, Director of Jurisdiction, Laborers’ International Union of North America; and Alfred A. DiRienzo, International Union of Bricklayers and Allied-Craftsman. AWCI President William A. Marek had extended the invitation to the union leaders to come to Houston to participate in the panel discussion of union problems.

Addressing the question of “How did we get where we are?” Robert Gasperow, Executive Director of the Construction Labor Relations Council, said that “there is no single group responsible and there is no single cure for the problem.” Gasperow advocated a series of corrective steps including:

1. Formation of local labor-management cooperative committees;
2. A special education program aimed at craftsmen and apprentices;
3. Improved training programs;
4. Changes in labor agreements to make crew costs more competitive.

Union appeals to get AWCI to join with labor in pushing for more “pro-labor” legislation fell on deaf ears, however. Said one AWCI member: “We don’t need laws forcing unionism down our throats any more than we need laws to make it mandatory for contractors to join an association.”

There was general agreement with James Mark Cassidy, a Chicago AWCI member, that no single solution will resolve the problem. Said Cassidy, “All solutions offered will be helpful in the long run. We must treat this as a generic and work together for a solution.”

Melvin Roots, General President of the Plasterers and Cement Masons, sounded the theme that “it is not too late to revive union construction. The time to act is now, and such action by both management and labor can bring back quality construction by union contractors.” Roots admitted that the key is increased productivity and said he agreed with the call for local labor-management committees to work together to seek local solutions. “We need a commitment from both sides,” Roots offered. “Those of us representing labor must do everything possible to get rid of restrictive practices, welcome the unfettered use of tools, and so forth. On the other hand, management has to manage better with better job scheduling, elimination of scheduled overtime and stockpiling of crews. We must also seek standardized clauses throughout the trades, establish a reliance on trust and understanding, and a sharing of power.”

From Economic View . . .

Laborers’ Union representative Jim Sheets also took to the “lack of understanding” point. He said unions feel contractors should work with union tradesmen as a moral issue while contractors look at the situation strictly from an economic point of view. Sheets also called on his fellow labor leaders to be willing to go after the “small jobs” again instead of concentrating only on large commercial and industrial projects.

A motion picture, “You Make The Difference,” being distributed by the Building and Construction Trades
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Department, was shown to the meeting by the Laborers. Depicting two journeymen concerned about the strong inroads by open shop construction, the film is aimed at tradesmen and presents a strong call for increased productivity if union construction is to make a comeback. (NOTE: This film is available for local use through AWCI’s Washington office.)

Referring to the movie, Sigurd Lucassen, 1st General Vice President of the Carpenters, pointed out that the film was made to show to labor groups. “Unfortunately,” said Lucassen, “union workers got into bad habits and adopted a bad guys/good guys attitude. Open shop work is not always cheaper,” he claimed. Lucassen pointed out that St. Louis, still a unionized city, “...is 24th out of 25 U.S. cities in housing costs, yet St. Louis is union. Why? Because of productivity, efficiency, qualified workers, and qualified contractors. Washington, D.C., is nearly 100% open shop and houses there are $40,000 to $50,000 higher by average than in St. Louis.”

Lucassen strongly supported the concept of local labor-management committees in order to create and continue dialogue between the local unions and the management associations. Lucassen said that unions had driven good contractors to the other side of the fence and that it was up to the unions to bring them back.

William Sealy, a Northern California contractor, picked up the theme of organizing small open shop contractors. He noted that organized labor has a habit of ignoring these smaller contractors until they pick up a big job. “If unionism is going to prevail,” said Sealy, “we must start with the small
contractors. We also have to stop business agents giving permits to their men to do small jobs on their own, hiring fellow union members, and competing with "fair" union contractors in the process."

Sealy noted it had taken four years to bring his area back to a 100% union position. One of the major steps taken here, he pointed out, was for contractors to refuse to lend equipment and tools to moonlighting journeymen and to get B.A.s to halt the practice of issuing work permits for moonlighters.

Sealy also pointed out that rather than pass new labor laws, all that is necessary is to enforce laws now on the books, especially the tax laws. He pointed to the use of cash by smaller open shop contractors who, he claimed, had a major advantage of not paying taxes and he also said that "double breasted journeymen" were a similar problem to the union contractor’s position.

AWCI Past President Robert L. Whittle reviewed the St. Louis situation. Eleven years ago, according to Whittle, each contract expired at the first of May and all summer long most trades were on strike. "We got together in 1974 and 1975 and formed PRIDE (Productivity & Responsibility Increases Development and Employment). We agreed to put a stop to jurisdictional disputes and work stoppages caused by them. We told the unions that the public did not give a damn about their jurisdictional claims and that we contractors were fed up with such nonsense. Now we have no work stoppages for jurisdictional matters and such disputes are amicably resolved in less than 24 hours. We have good communications, not only on a labor-management basis, but also between the unions and between the contractor associations."

A number of benefits of working union were set forth by AWCI member Carmen Paterniti of Far Hills, New Jersey:

—Training;
—Qualifications;
—Manpower pool availability;
—Continuity;
—Bidding jobs with known labor costs.

Paterniti said that in New Jersey, the unions monitor the jobs but some union leaders there are not doing their job: "They allow union men to work open shop and we find union workers competing with union contractors, even hiring their fellow journeymen when they moonlight. These men don’t pay the union and they are in reality nothing more than small open shop contractors!"

Sheets, responding to this, admitted that the practice exists. "In fact," said Sheets, "the ABC (Associated Builders and Contractors) claims that 50% of its members’ journeymen are union workers! The most damaging thing that could happen to the open shop movement,” Sheets said, “would be the destruction of the labor movement. Then they would have no manpower pool and a whole new set of institutions would be required.”

The seminar attendees agreed with Alfred DiRienzo, Bricklayers’ representative to the meeting, that . . .