

The Birth of a Union—The End of

Wherein: We hold that all men are created free and equal, and that honor and merit makes the man, and that self-preservation is the first law of nature, and that he who would be free must first strike the blow; therefore be it

Resolved: That we, Hodcarriers, Building and Common Laborers do hereby declare and adopt the following for the base of our operations:

First: To gather under one grand banner all of those who toil on buildings within our craft and calling.

Second: To promote, by all honorable means, the social and financial standing of all those who wish to partake of the fruits created by amalgamation.

Third: To create general agitation for the purpose of making a universal eight (8) hour day. To increase the wages of members of the craft.

Fourth: To establish a system of conciliation and arbitration in the different sections of our land.

Fifth: To help the members of the craft in securing lawful and profitable employment.

—Declaration of Principles

Adopted at the Founding Convention
International Hod Carriers and
Building Laborers' Union
April 13-17, 1903

First Class Workers, Second-Class Status

Working as a Laborer has always been challenging and rewarding, but never easy or privileged. Throughout the 19th century, Laborers did the heavy lifting, carried the hods, dug the tunnels, surfaced the streets and played a central role in every aspect of construction. Without the immensely difficult and productive work of Laborers, the buildings, dams and bridges of the 1800s would never have been constructed, canals would never have been dug, train tracks would never have been laid, and streets would never have been built.

Yet, despite their indispensable contributions, Laborers were treated as second-class citizens both on and off the job. They were forced to perform the most dangerous work, yet received little if any training and few safeguards. They usually were excluded from the craft unions that were forming in the 1800s or could only join as “helpers.” They were paid the least and disrespected the most.



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March 12: Samuel Gompers, President of the American Federation of Labor, sends out a convention call to independent local Laborers' unions, urging them to come together to establish “an international union of Building Laborers...adopt a Constitution...and elect officers to administer its affairs.” Most construction crafts had already formed international unions by this date. Gompers recognizes that laborers—often treated as second-class citizens by employers and even the craft unions—needed to be empowered through a strong international union.

April 13-17: The International Hod Carriers and Building Laborers' Union (IHC+BLU) is founded, as 25 delegates from 23 Local Unions in 17 cities—representing 8,186 Laborers—meet in Washington, D.C., at the union's founding convention. The delegates elect Hermon Lilien, a Belgian immigrant from Chicago Local Union 4, as General President, and Harold Stemburgh of Waverly, N.Y., as General Secretary-Treasurer.

The AFL grants the IHC+BLU exclusive jurisdiction over the class of work claimed in the union's Constitution:

“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.”

1903

The Wright Brothers make the first manned flight.



The Ingalls Building in Cincinnati—the world's first skyscraper with a reinforced concrete structure—opens.

Exploitation

Laborers often came from groups discriminated against by society at large: African Americans; recent immigrants from Ireland, and later Italy, Poland, and other countries in Eastern and Southern Europe; Asian Americans; Mexican Americans; and Native Americans.

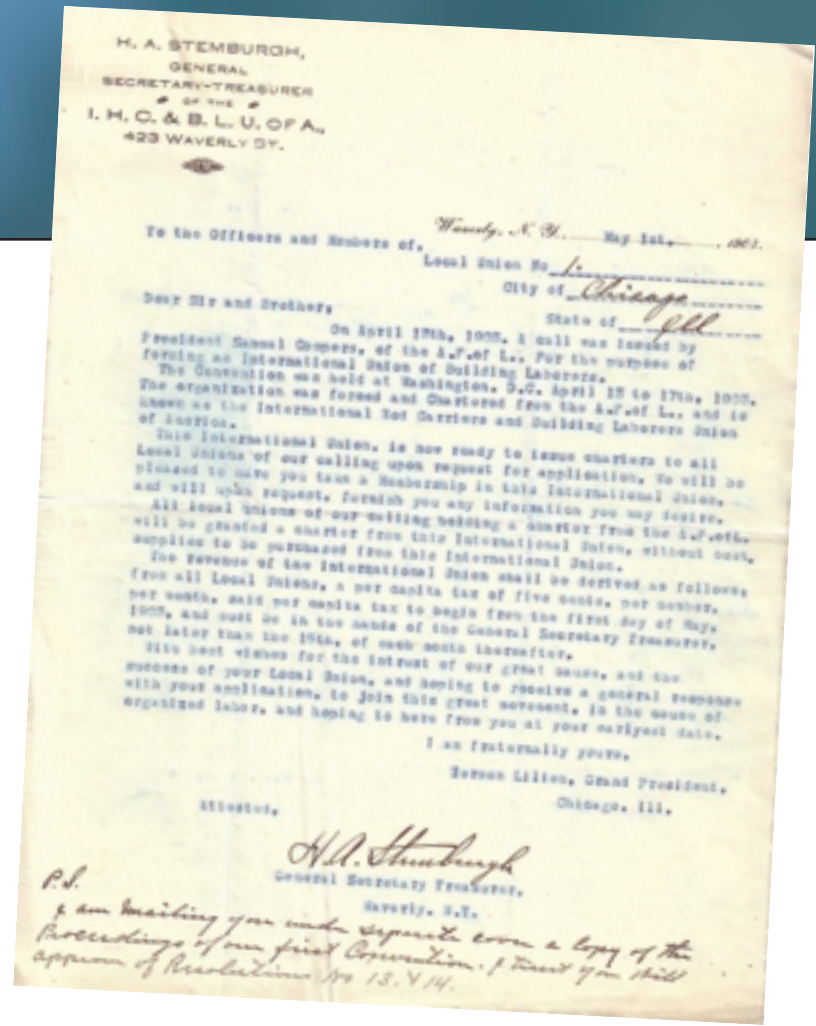
While the work was difficult, dirty and dangerous in urban areas, in the countryside, where canals and railroads were being built by hand, there were no unions even for the crafts. Wages often averaged \$1 per day. Death and injury from accidents were a constant risk, but infectious diseases such as cholera and dysentery were even more devastating, wiping out entire labor camps in a few short days.

Early Organizing

In response to these extraordinarily harsh working conditions, Laborers started to organize their own local unions in the latter half of the century. Some Chicago Laborers formed their own union in 1861. These early city laborer unions were often organized on ethnic lines or by the specific craft they tended.

During the post-Civil War era, other building trades, such as carpenters, lathers and plasterers, joined their local unions into national and international organizations. These early unions united in a national labor federation in 1881, reorganizing five years later as the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

Over the next 17 years, while craft union members started improving their wages, working conditions and dignity, armed with the added strength of national representation and the solidarity created by the AFL, Laborers remained too often on the outside looking in. While local Laborers' unions won important



gains for their members, Laborers still lagged behind their counterparts in their ability to shape their destiny and stand up to their employers.

Adding to the immense challenge of organizing and empowering Laborers through collective bargaining were the transient nature of work, the need for many Laborers to work in other fields during inevitable gaps in construction work, ethnic divisions that employers were sometimes able to exploit, and the *Padroni* system (see page 10).

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June 15: The International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers officially endorse the IHC+BLU as the union with exclusive jurisdiction over laborers' work, a major boost for the newly-formed union.



Congress creates the Department of Commerce and Labor.

August 26: The IHC+BLU and the craft unions unite to found the Structural Building Trades Alliance (SBTA), which includes two unions not yet affiliated with the AFL, the Bricklayers and Operative Plasters' and Cement Masons' International Association of the United States and Canada. This alliance bolsters IHC+BLU's legitimacy and is a valuable tool for overcoming rival, independent unions.

The Chicago Laborers' District Council is chartered, the first district council in the IHC+BLU.

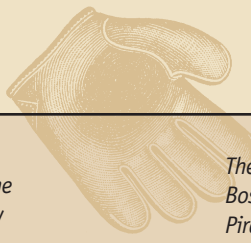


With the support of the United States, Panama secedes from Colombia to become an independent country, opening the way for construction of the Panama Canal.

December: By the end of 1903, the IHC+BLU has chartered 136 locals, including its first Canadian affiliate in Kingston, Ontario. It is receiving per capita of 5 cents per member per month on more than 2,000 members.



The first World Series is played, with the Boston Red Sox defeating the Pittsburgh Pirates 5 games to 3.





The Call is Issued

Clearly, new steps were needed to improve the lives of those who worked at the calling. AFL President Samuel Gompers took action. On March 12, 1903, he issued a convention call to local Laborers' unions, urging them to come together to establish "an international union of Building Laborers...adopt a Constitution for the government of the organization and elect officers to administer its affairs."

A Union is Born

On April 13, 1903, 25 delegates convened in Washington, D.C. for the founding convention of an international union for Laborers.

They represented 8,186 Laborers from 23 Local Unions in 17 cities across North America. The Local Unions ranged in size from the 4,039 members of Chicago Local Union 1 to the 13 members of Federal Union 9454 of Washington, D.C. Nineteen of the Local Unions has already affiliated with the AFL as "Federal Unions," a special status the federation provided to protect and support Local Unions not yet represented by an International Union. Many of the Local Unions had also affiliated with city-wide central labor councils.

As Gompers told the delegates in his Convention address:

The constant struggle in which the wage earners of our country are continually engaged for the attainment of their rights, and the mitigation of the wrongs they daily endure renders it essential that they organize and unite in one common brotherhood regardless of nationality, creed and color.

The delegates ensured that all Local Unions would have a strong voice in the new union, even though three-quarters of the existing membership belonged to the three Chicago Locals.

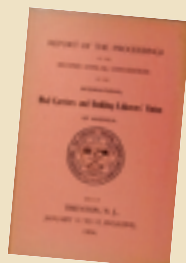
They elected as their General President Hermon Lilien, a Belgian immigrant from Chicago Local Union 4. Harold Stemburgh of Waverly, N.Y., was elected General Secretary-Treasurer. And they elected five Vice Presidents, reflecting the geographic range of the budding union: Peter Larson of Philadelphia, Pa., James Mallay of White Plains, N.Y., Val Canavan of Portland, Maine, August Palutze of Cleveland, Ohio, and Elmo Chambers of Pittsburgh, Pa.



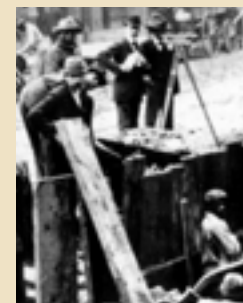
Delegates voted to affiliate with the AFL, wrote the union's Constitution, set a per capita tax of 5 cents per member per month, imposed a \$10 charter fee for

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January 11-17: The IHC+BLU convenes for its first regular Convention. The Executive Board votes to waive charter fees for independent laborers' locals to encourage them to join.



September: The IHC+BLU has 181 active locals. Nearly half are in five states: Illinois (24), New York (19), Ohio (19), Pennsylvania (14) and New Jersey (8). Three locals are in Canada.



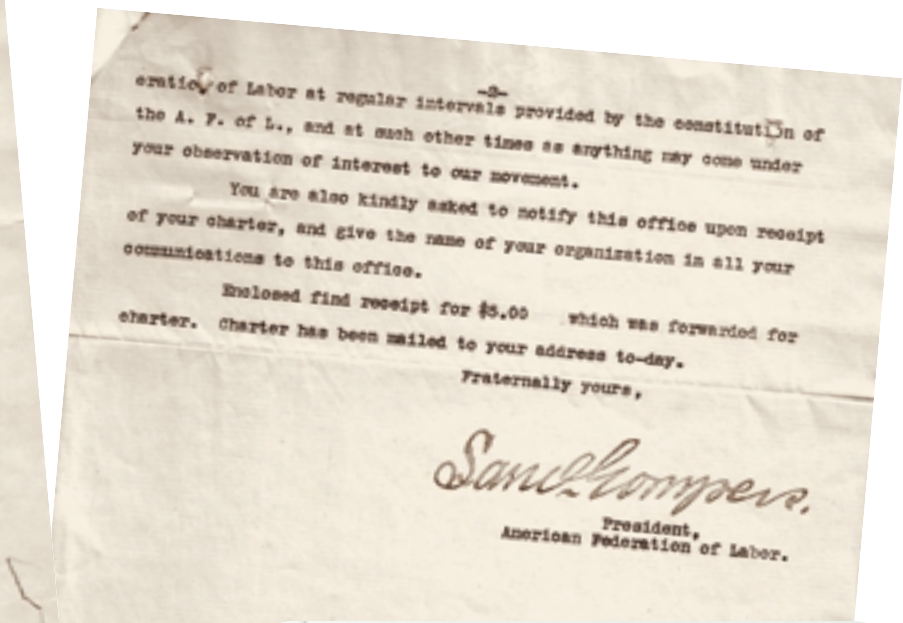
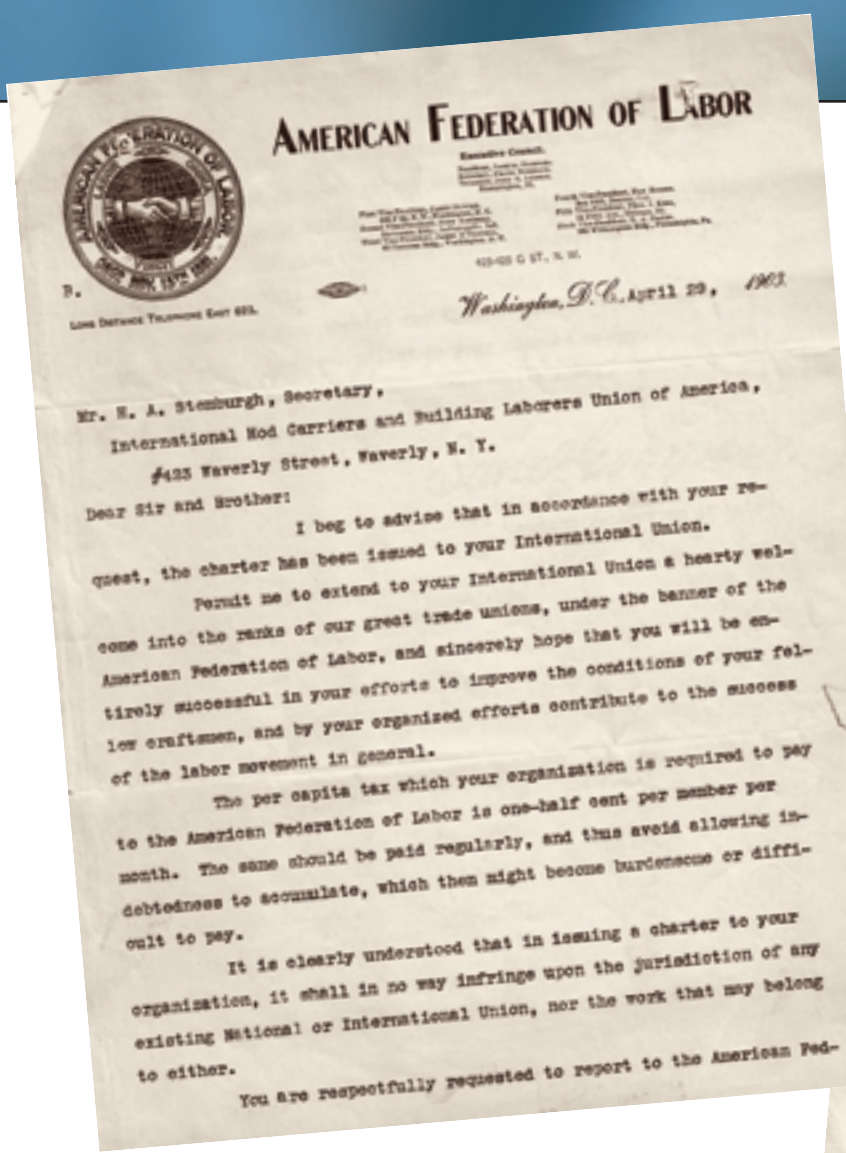
The National Child Labor Committee is founded to protect children from workplace abuses.



The first cement football stadium is built at Harvard University, seating 40,000.



President Theodore Roosevelt (R) is reelected.



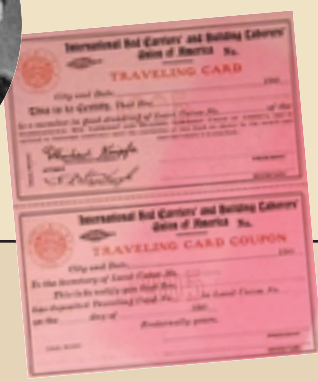
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1905

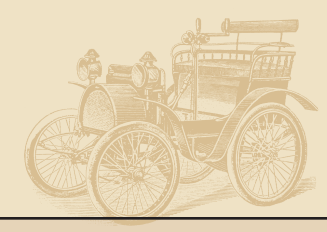
At the IHC+BLU's Third Convention (they were held annually in the union's early years), Herman Lilien declines to run for re-election as General President. He is succeeded by another Chicagoan, Michael Knipfer of Local Union 1. But soon thereafter, Knipfer and his Local Union are expelled for non-payment of per capita. First Vice-President August Palutze of Cleveland Local Union 310 is elected as the new IHC+BLU General President.



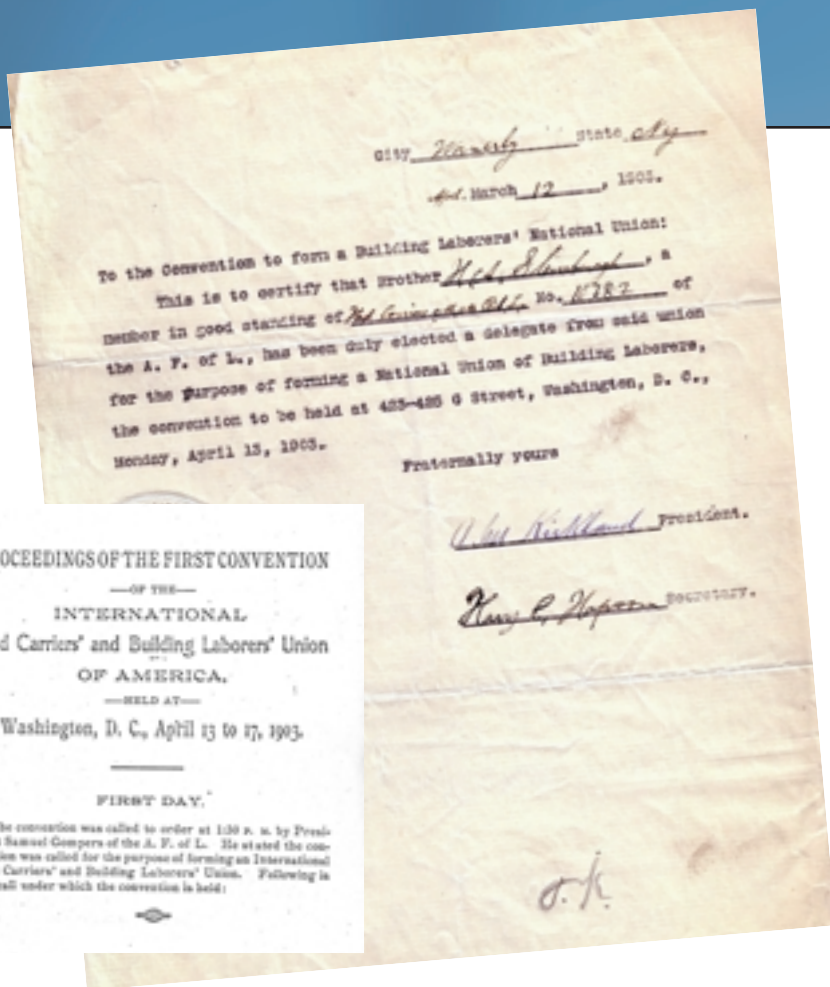
Alberta and Saskatchewan become provinces of Canada.



May: Laborers vote by a 1,052 to 747 margin to raise their per capita from 5 to 10 cents per month, agreeing to Secretary-Treasurer Stenburgh's call to "be thoroughly prepared to meet the combined, organized opposition of the employing classes."



25,000 autos are manufactured in the U.S., 10 times the number produced in 1899.



Moving forward

Following the conclusion of the IHC+BLU's successful founding convention, delegates and newly-elected officers returned home to start the challenging, painstaking work of building a great international union. General Secretary-Treasurer Stemburgh opened the union's headquarters in his hometown of Waverly, N.Y., and immediately sought an AFL charter for Laborers' jurisdiction.

The AFL swiftly granted the IHC+BLU exclusive jurisdiction over the class of work claimed in the union's Constitution:

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.

This action by the AFL gave the IHC+BLU instant legitimacy in the eyes of most of the craft unions and raised union Laborers, for the first time, onto a more even footing with the other organized building trades workers. As evidence, the

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

The delegates' first resolution was designed to advance solidarity and avert damaging intra-union fights, stating "that where in a locality a charter is issued to a local union no more charters for any more local unions shall be granted without the consent of the local already in existence."

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Delegates to the IHC+BLU Convention elect John Breen of Chicago Local Union 4 as General President, raise per capita to 15 cents a month, and establish strike and death benefits. The per capita increase allows for the *Official Journal*—the precursor to *The Laborer* magazine—to be offered to all members.



By coming together as an international union, Laborers experience direct economic gains. Pittsburgh building laborers and hod carriers increase their wages from 17½ cents/hour to 25 cents/hour (35 cents for scaffold men and mortar mixers) and reduce their workday from 10 hours to 8½ hours due to a union contract.



April 18: Much of San Francisco is destroyed by a devastating earthquake and fire. It kills approximately 2,500 people and causes more than \$400 million in damage.

85 million people now live in the United States.



Bricklayers officially endorsed the IHC+BLU as the union with exclusive jurisdiction over Laborers' work on June 15, 1903.

Strengthening this solid foundation, the IHC+BLU and the craft unions formalized their relationship with the founding of the Structural Building Trades Alliance (SBTA) two months later. This would become a powerful tool for overcoming rival, independent unions claiming the same work for their members.

The fledgling union could not afford to hire paid organizers, but International Officers traveled around their regions seeking to organize new Laborers' locals and affili-

ate existing unions. They also sought and received assistance from paid AFL organizers.

These efforts bore initial fruit. By the end of 1903, just eight months into its existence, the IHC+BLU had chartered 136 locals, including its first Canadian affiliate in Kingston, Ontario.

While the Laborers' Union would face a host of challenges and difficulties in the years to come, it had survived its birth and stood solidly on its own two feet—putting itself in a position to improve the quality of life and raise the standard of living for millions of Laborers as its first century unfolded.



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February: Domenico D'Alessandro of Boston Local Union 209 is appointed an IHC+BLU general organizer. He travels up and down the East Coast organizing new locals and bringing existing independent Laborers' Local Unions into the IHC+BLU.

September: D'Alessandro is elected IHC+BLU International Vice-President.



Oklahoma becomes the 46th state.

A death benefit is implemented, set at \$75 for members with more than one year of service and \$50 for those with less than one year's service. Five cents per member is also set aside for a strike fund.

The new union is now receiving per capita on more than 11,000 members.



Nearly 1.3 million immigrants enter the United States, the most ever.

1907





Throwing Off the Padroni's Shackles

By the late 19th and early 20th century, indentured servitude should have been a relic of the past. Unfortunately, it was all too real to tens of thousands of immigrant Italian Laborers, who came to the U.S. and Canada under the evil *padrone* system—essentially a corrupt “hiring hall” that enriched employers and *padroni* (bosses) at the expense of workers.

It would take the courageous work of the Laborers’ union and the man who would later become its General President, Domenico d’Alessandro, before the *padrone* system would be overcome.

The *padrone* system helped satisfy contractors’ need for cheap labor. Employers made arrangements with *padroni* to supply workers for construction projects. *Padroni* then arranged for the workers’ passage from Italy to North America.

Suffering from poverty and famine, many Italians were eager to begin a new life in the New World. When *padroni* offered the prospect of jobs in the U.S. and Canada, it was often their one opportunity to migrate across the Atlantic.

Padroni bought tickets for the ocean voyage in bulk at huge discounts, then resold them to immigrants at more than full price, lending the money in the process. Once in the U.S. or Canada, the immigrants had to work exclusively for the *padroni* to pay off the debt, which often took two or three years.

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1908

Domenico D’Alessandro is elected IHC+BLU General President, replacing John Breen. AFL organizer Jacob Talezaar is appointed acting Secretary-Treasurer. After serving for six months, he is replaced by Vice President Earnest Villard of Kingston, Ontario, Local Union 66.



The first tunnel under the Hudson River opens, connecting Manhattan with New Jersey by rail.

The IHC+BLU affiliates with the Trades & Labour Congress of Canada.



1909

Republican William Howard Taft defeats Democrat William Jennings Bryan for the Presidency.



The 42-story Metropolitan Life Insurance Tower in New York opens as the world’s tallest building.

But that was only the beginning of the *padroni's* exploitation of Italian immigrants. Each time they were hired for a construction job, Laborers had to pay the *padrone* a bossatura charge (finder's fee). *Padroni* conspired with employers to keep wages low. They often controlled the workers' overcrowded housing and charged exorbitant rents, even when employers provided it for free. Sometimes *padroni* even operated stores on the site, where they marked up prices to twice the retail price.

D'Alessandro was outraged at the *padrone* system's abuses. After emigrating from Avesta, Italy, to Boston in 1898, he sought to find work as a bricklayer outside the *padrone* system and found the jobs locked up. To fight back, he founded a branch of the Dante Aligheri Society, which was sponsored by the Italian government to educate citizens abroad. There, he provided vital information to newly arrived Italians about their rights and how to avoid the *padroni*.

At the same time, the Italian consul in Boston, Baron Gustavo Tosti, was equally appalled by the *padrone* system. He recognized that unionization offered the best chance for immigrants to break free of the *padroni* and build a better life. While Tosti could not organize workers directly, d'Alessandro was ready and willing to spearhead the campaign.

With support from the AFL, d'Alessandro organized a series of mass meetings for the Italian immigrants who were excavating and building Boston's subway. He explained that union membership would give them the power to improve their lives and leave the *padroni* behind. Within three months, the union was formed, chartered as AFL Laborers' and Excavators' Union No. 11,679. Soon thereafter, the union won a wage increase to \$2/day, a significant achievement. A year later, the union joined the IHC+BLU as Local 209.

D'Alessandro also persuaded the Italian government to establish and subsidize the Benevolent Aid Society for Italian immigrants, which he made a subsidiary of Local Union 209. The Society helped immigrants empower themselves through union membership and steer clear of the *padroni's* quasi-enslavement.

Under d'Alessandro's leadership, Local Union 209 established a hiring hall and persuaded employers to hire crews there, rather than from the *padroni*. While the union negotiated much higher wages than the *padroni*, it did not charge employers fees for providing the crews and offered a larger, more stable pool of reliable, productive, skilled workers. This made hiring union more attractive to Boston's contractors.

In addition, d'Alessandro and Local Union 209's other leaders stopped employment agents from collecting bossatura charges, pushed bills through the state outlawing the *padrone* system's abuses, and gave immigrants the leverage to increase their pay, shorten their working hours and better their working conditions.

By providing immigrants the tools to build a better life and avoid the *padroni*, d'Alessandro helped Local Union 209 reach the 2,000 member mark by June 1906. This brought him to the attention of the IHC+BLU leadership. In February 1907, he was hired by the International union as a general organizer, later that year he won election as First Vice President, and in 1908, he was elected General President.

D'Alessandro would serve in this position with distinction, building the Laborers' into a North American powerhouse until his death in 1926. But nowhere would he leave a greater legacy than with Boston's Italian immigrant Laborers, whom he freed from the shackles of the *padroni*.

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Delegates to the IHC+BLU Convention reelect President D'Alessandro and Secretary-Treasurer Villard.



The Queensboro and Manhattan Bridges open in New York, the first major double-deck and double-deck suspension bridges, respectively.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is founded.

1910

Earnest Villard resigns as General Secretary-Treasurer and is replaced by Achilles Persion of Albany, N.Y., Local Union 190. Persion will serve with distinction for 40 years.



The typical American worker earns less than \$15 a week, working between 54 and 60 hours.

The United States has 1,000 miles of concrete road, up from 144 in 1900.