

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 309 and the Fate of American Construction Trade Unions,
1965-2002.^[1]
Louis Baczewski

Louis Baczewski, a senior history major at Eastern Illinois University, wrote this paper for Dr. Edmund Werhle Fall of 2001. It was part of an independent study project and received the Alexander Hamilton Paper Award.

“The word around the IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) was that if you could not find work in the United States or Canada you could go to East St Louis.”^[2] IBEW Local 309 in East St Louis had a reputation throughout the country as a strong local. It controlled the work and provided above average working conditions in its jurisdiction. 309 cooperated with its state and local legislators and could count on a vast array of jobs due to the regions industrial prospects. In the mid to late 1960s the work picture could not have been better for all trades in this region, and across the country. Unemployment was at an all time low; in 1968 and 1969 “rates fell as low as 1.6 percent for electricians while the other trades had similar rates.”^[3] Low unemployment coupled with the building trade’s relative monopoly on the supply of skilled labor amounted to a contractor’s worst nightmare. In this period, organized labor had the upper hand in this struggle and hence the ability to make significant wage and benefit demands. Yet these exceptional times would prove to be a double-edged sword.

Local 309, like trade unions across the country, lacked the manpower in the 1960s to meet the demand generated by government-funded projects. In effect, the entire country was in a construction boom and skilled journeymen were in great demand. Contractors were dependent upon unions to provide enough skilled labor for the many projects developing around the country. Construction unions looked outside of their own membership to fill this labor void, taking on “permit workers” or “white tickets”^[4] who were not fully accepted into the union, but worked on union projects. Local 309 used white tickets when there was too much work for the local men to handle. Yet, when work slowed in the 1970s, these ticket workers lost their jobs.

What seemed as a period of opportunity, was in truth a time when trade unions created their own worst enemy: non-union competition. This problem began when the prosperity of the 1960s era ended, and the white ticket workers were “put back on the street.” Due to the bargaining power that construction unions gained during the 1960s, contractors and corporations alike became increasingly resentful of union power. The prosperity and negotiating strength that unions took for granted during the late 1960s would soon be compromised. When the unions failed to organize the white tickets after the prosperity of the 1960s subsided, corporations saw the opportunity to capitalize on the available workforce. These white tickets received on the job training, but were excluded from union membership. Unions would not accept these ticket people, so non-union firms did so.

The repercussions caused by these exclusionary practices, which were made in unions across the country, were not as harmful in local 309’s region. As IBEW locals and other trade locals throughout the United States began to fall apart, 309 stayed strong. Yet, local 309 was still plagued by a mentality of exclusion, which characterized most trade locals. Only their tough reputation, infrastructure, and political clout enabled them to survive. Former 309 business agent^[5] Mike Faust suggested that, “the local did not want too many members, for they wanted to keep the work in a confined group, selfishness on our part perhaps. No, not perhaps, surely it was selfishness.”^[6]

This mentality would destroy many unions across the country once the difficult economic times of the 1970s and 1980s coincided with a corporate and conservative governmental collaboration to undermine unions. Union market share dwindled since the 1970s and as construction jobs increased, union memberships stayed relatively static. Anti-labor legislation and corporate attacks combined with construction unions’ self-inflicted wounds resulted in a battle for the very survival of organized labor. Trade unions had become increasingly anachronistic in their methods; old school ideologies hindered change or even the recognition of an existing threat. By the 1980s, the non-union threat could no longer be ignored or dealt with through intimidation or violence. All of these aforementioned threats combined with the drastic economic changes of the past 40 years have led unionists to the realization that they must either change or perish.

Using local 309 as an example, this paper investigates the economic crossroads of the 1960s and the effects of this turning point on the present day. The “country club” mentality, which was characteristic of most trade unions, was no different in local 309. Yet local 309, unlike many trade locals across the country, survived: the question is why? The reason seems to be 309’s strong cooperation with local and state legislators as well as a relatively

diversified and abundant work picture in their region. However, local 309 was still hindered by the membership's exclusiveness and unwillingness to change, organize, or do smaller commercial and residential work. Despite the amount of work and cooperation with legislators, 309 now realizes that change must come if it wants to survive. Eventually, the determined and skillful leadership of the local was able to make great strides, but even those officials seem to wonder if it is too little too late.

--The Sixties--

During the mid 1960s, the construction boom reached national consciousness. As President Lyndon Johnson said in May 1964, "Construction wages are rising too fast, to the dismay: of home-buyers and home makers, who have to pay through the nose for plumbers carpenters, electricians, etc; of other workers who feel these decentralized unions are getting away with murder."^[7] Although unions saw it differently, St. Louis also had a construction boom. In November of 1966, the Local 309 submission to the *Electrical Workers Journal* headlined as, "Many Traveling Brothers Helping Local 309." The local was overrun with work and could not handle the influx. The article boasted that at least 200 men were working on Granite City Steel foundry alone. By 1967 with the construction of a basic oxygen furnace and hot strip projects, the Granite job would carry an estimated 700 electricians.^[8] All the while, the local industrial complexes of Monsanto, and Ethyl in East St Louis, had an estimated 100 to 200 men each. Around the same time, major commercial jobs were also underway. The entire Southern Illinois University Campus at Edwardsville had been under construction since mid 1965 and would be until the early 1970s. By 1967 the Federal government announced a ten million-dollar project on near by Scott Air-Force Base, a five-year powerhouse job was begun in Baldwin^[9], and Granite City announced another seven million-dollar project.^[10]

Consequently, most of the 300 Local 309 wiremen were forced to serve as foreman or crew leaders, and the rest of the workers had to be found elsewhere. The first option to fill this void was to use "traveling brothers," journeymen IBEW members who travel to find work in other locals typically during boom times when overtime is involved or to find a local with a better pay scale.^[11] But travelers, for the most part, sought overtime work and a sizable amount of these jobs were only 40 hours-a-week. Since this economic boom was raging all across the country at this time, many travelers went somewhere else. "A fella [traveler] may have worked for you for a day, six hours, whatever...when he found out there was no overtime, he quit the job," explained one 309 foreman.^[12]

With few options, local 309 allowed contractors to hire off the street, under the condition that they would pay them the prevailing wage. These men hired off the street were called ticket help or white tickets. The region was so desperate that for electricians that one contractor in Granite City began to advertise on St Louis KMOX radio in order to find workers. Men were hired in Granite City, promptly put on a company truck, and then taken to the hardware store to buy their hand tools. The tool cost was deducted from their first paychecks and they were put to work.^[13] At this point, there was so much work, that experience was helpful, but hardly necessary for being hired. Former BA Mike Faust who was second in command on the Granite City Steel BOF project, remembered that his crew, was comprised of only one journeyman the rest were ticket workers.^[14]

From 1966 to late 1969, this boom continued. Work eventually tapered off in 1971, to the point where only a handful of travelers or white tickets were employed in the 309 area.^[15] The boom died, but in those few years, drastic changes had occurred that which changed American union strength forever. The hiring of white tickets to fill the work void was used across the country and in every trade from carpenters to boilermakers. When the economic boom ended, the ticket help was put back on the street. Former BA, David Foree recalls:

The mistake we made was, [from the ticket help] we took no working dues, we took no working assessments: we did not allow them to become members, we basically taught them the trade and then we said, "we don't have any use for you." And the mistake was made that we should have taken in, at least, those who were qualified, and we would not have the non-union competition we have today, and basically all the crafts did the same thing... It didn't make a difference what part of the country you were in...those men, had been taught skills now, and they were going to go on making a living like everyone else.^[16]

This portended trouble. Yet few even considered expanding the membership of Local 309, and any local for that matter: this was not even seen as an option yet alone a necessity. The union now admits its shortsightedness and the desire for a "country club" atmosphere within its membership. Union members were confident that if they

restricted their membership they could control the trade.^[17] The members worked to remain exclusive, in part because the 1960s had proved to be a great victory, due to union's success in winning their wage demands. Hence the unions felt no need to expand their memberships and instead kept their work in a confined group of established members.

This mentality combined with the fact that the unions controlled the market share at the time perpetuated indifference among union members. The average journeyman had no reason to fear any loss of work except in relation to normal fluctuations in construction. Most locals did not want to expand their membership at the risk of putting themselves out of work. Even as early as 1942 an IBEW member had complained that, "there is an appalling lethargy on the part of our organization. Trade school graduates were flooding the market for electricians, yet the old-timers refused to organize them."^[18] One 309 man commented that before his admittance to the local in 1956, "there was a period for about 10 years that the local did not take one apprentice."^[19] The old union idea of "there is only so much work to go around" was in a sense logical, but it hindered change, which became more and more necessary after the 1960s. Even after this boom time subsided, as former business agent, Mike Faust recalled, local 309 "did not organize 10 people in that period, 309 was horrible about organizing. We didn't want to organize...our membership did not want the man in charge to do it [the BA]....50 percent was because the membership didn't want it, and 50 percent was my own fault...we were all at fault."^[20]

One major problem was the rampant nepotism in local 309 and in all construction trades. "The bad thing about nepotism is, that to say that because my father was a good electrician and loved the trade, just because my name is the same as his, then I am going to be good. No! I might be the biggest damned dud to ever set foot in the local. And I can think of some who left a mark on my mind that will never be erased" commented former assistant BA Don Schmeder.^[21] "Eighty percent of the people in the industry were relatives of some sort up until the mid 1960s."^[22]

Change did come in 1966, when the JATC (Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee) was created in local 309. "The advent of the JATC brought an end to all that nepotism, it was the best thing that ever happened to us, we had a hard time believing it, but it was a fact."^[23] This new committee comprised of both contractors and union members selected apprentices, placing more on the basis of qualifications rather than on mere name recognition. The union now had to work with their NECA (National Electrical Contractors Association) contractors to choose the apprentice candidates, consequently the best candidates were now taken. In addition, the federal government would step in, under the Free and Fair Employment Act (Civil Rights Act of 1964), in an effort to end discrimination as well.

"In 1970 IBEW local 309 signed a Consent Decree with the federal government, stating that although we had not discriminated in the past, we would continue not to discriminate in the future."^[24] The basis for this legal action was 309's "violation of civil rights failing or refusing to make reasonable steps to eliminate racially discriminatory policies and practices."^[25] Shortly after the signing of this decree, 309 accepted its first black member into apprenticeship. Eventually, the federal government would enforce guidelines that dictated how the structure of the apprenticeship program would have to operate. Eventually, the federal government would monitor every apprenticeship program.^[26]

While these changes did bring much needed reform, the problem with the white tickets was not addressed: between 250 and 300 had worked in 309's jurisdiction alone.^[27] In essence, there were as many white tickets as there were members in the local in the late 1960s. Not one of these white tickets was brought into membership. Former BA Mike Faust suggested that most of these ticket workers were "Boomers"^[28] who moved on to someplace else. "They were informed that they were just guests here, and only a few stuck around and tried to set up, but they eventually failed. We made them understand that they were only guests here."^[29] 309 relied on its image to deal with non-union workers and ticket workers.

As Mike Faust stated, "We use to have a very rough reputation, very rough; rough as in don't mess with us."^[30] One such example of the local's toughness was revealed when Mike Faust described how he dealt with a group of recalcitrant travelers:

There is a group of IBEW members called the fleas...they are travelers... and they come and try to establish their rules, hoping to dictate, policies, practices and procedures [undermining the local authority on the job]...At the BOF job they were really bad, in fact they even had meetings. I found out

about one of their meetings [and] went into that tavern. There was ten or twelve of them in there. And I said, 'say you all know who I am, my name is Mike Faust, I'm working on this job right over here. If any of you guys, in here, are on that job, over there, and you are not out of this place in two minutes, you're fired tomorrow. And any of the rest of you guys that don't like it, well meet me over in the parking lot, right now, and I'll take you one at a time till you're all done. You son of a bitches aren't gonna light here.' So, you would be surprised, [we] had no more fleas on that job...That's how you have to do things some times. I don't put up with that shit and I don't expect our people to put up with it...You can't be nice to somebody who is tearing down your conditions.

Scare tactics and a tough reputation were enough to quell the threat for a time. Most "old timers" would not discuss such tactics, but clearly intimidation was used. This imposing image was not developed by word alone and it is obvious that 309's visage was a formidable defense in it of itself.

Despite this reputation, some white tickets remained working in the smaller union shops doing smaller residential work, which most wiremen hated to do. Mike Faust stated that "one [white ticket] worked for 37 years, and we would not take him in. There were 6 or 7 ticket people that were in shops for a least 10 years and they were still there when I left [the office of BA (which he held between 1970 and 1990)], but they were never organized."^[31]

Yet, many union wiremen and linemen refused to perform the smaller residential and commercial work. "Our guys would not wire houses; it was like sending them to their deaths, nobody wanted to do it. Most small shops usually consisted of... travelers and ticket people"^[32] Assistant BA Artie Minor agreed: "We had a problem with our wireman and our contractors leaving the small work to the non-union."^[33] In addition, one major problem with ignoring residential work was, "just about anybody can do it...a non-union contractor can go in with a minimal amount of training and become productive at it in a short time."^[34] During times of construction decline, smaller work like residential served as a savior helping workers make it through the tough times. But since it was increasingly ignored in the 1960s and 1970s, the unions' residential market share decreased. To give an example,

"Phoenix Arizona...had three or four powerhouses [heavy industrial] going at the same time and all the local men ran to the powerhouses. And when the powerhouses were done: they were done! They are now making a total package of about 18 bucks an hour, recalled 309 BA Dave Foree."^[35]

Local 309's present total package is around \$38.39 an hour. The difference between a \$18 total package and \$38.39, drives home the importance of not ignoring the small projects.

One example of other tensions in the union was, as East St. Louis became poorer and more violent in the late 1960s, the business office wanted to relocate. The membership refused and resisted a dues increase to pay for a new union hall. It took a nearby shooting for the membership to finally agree to the dues increase needed for relocation. According to one member, the only reason that the hall finally relocated was because a man happened to get shot near the hall and stumbled in for help during a union meeting. "If that guy hadn't got shot, we would still be down there."^[36] In 1968 the 309 submission to the *Electrical Worker*, revealed that 309 had broken ground for a new hall in Collinsville.^[37]

Members resistance to the relocation was not the only rank-and-file problem. It was difficult for the business agents to accomplish much in the way of change, including organizing campaigns, because the membership resisted almost anything, especially anything that involved a dues increase. Assistant BA Don Schmeder stated that, "whenever you were going to vote for an increase in dues, we didn't have enough chairs in the hall, here they come, and they're all mad. But we always had enough chairs at a normal union meeting."^[38] Issues of money were always a problem for the business office. For example, Don Schmeder stated that, "I had an oil change once, it cost \$15, a member said 'don't you think you could have got that done cheaper some place else.' I responded, do you want me to spend time looking for the cheapest oil change, or would you rather I worked on union business."^[39] Resistance to change coupled with the problem of ignoring the smaller work and not organizing, eventually resulted in severe problems.

--The Seventies--

"Most observers agree that as late as 1970, nearly 80 percent of total construction dollar volume in the United

States was performed under union contract. Today this figure is probably closer to 30 percent or less.” In 1969, a construction users anti-inflation commission was formed, it eventually came to be known as the Business Roundtable. Its members were chief executives from 200 major corporations, “with the expressed goal of restoring order to an industry that they perceived to be out of control.”^[41] The commission represented the major corporations of General Motors, General Electric, Exxon, U.S. Steel, Dupont, and many other major companies, who wished to undermine the trade unions control, because of inflated labor costs.^[42] The Business Roundtable worked to create a non-union force to serve the corporations by subverting collective bargaining. The mentality on the local level allowed this to occur. Unions had held so much control that they were unaware and unwilling to realize the problems that would soon develop. Major corporations soon worked to build non-union competition across the country.

Even as early as 1970 IBEW president Charles Pillard warned that, “if the old head in-the-sand policy regarding the very real problems facing the building trades are continued, disastrous days lie ahead for organized tradesmen...these large contractors would not hesitate to go open-shop to stay in business. And they certainly intend to stay in business!”^[43] Although the international office gave warnings, no major non-union organizing campaigns would be initiated in the IBEW until 1987. In any event, the 1970s would prove the beginning of the end of the AFL-CIO’s hold on the construction trades. Local 309 survived while many locals’ collective bargaining crumbled even so, the local still faced a treacherous road. The 1970s proved difficult as the economy weakened and competition grew; the 1980s proved even worse.

In February 1971, the *Electrical Worker* entry from 309 headlined, “Local 309 hopes for improved work scene.”^[44] The amount of work decreased for both the inside^[45] and outside^[46] branches of the trade at this time, but most men were working. However, by March of 1972, “more wiremen were out of work than at any time in recent history.”^[47] Available work declined during 1972 for Local 309, forcing the local to implement its first 32-hour workweek.^[48] The reduced workweek was effective, but there were still times when as much as 40 percent of the local was laid off.^[49] Layoffs mounted throughout 1972 and continued into 1973 and 1974.

The country was facing a recession and an economic stagnation. Foreign competition lay at the heart of many of the challenges. A section of the *Electrical Worker* stated, “that the United States suffered the equivalent of a net loss of 900,000 jobs because of rising imports and the movement of American production overseas between 1966 and 1971.”^[50] The 1973 oil embargo made matters even worse, because of inflated operating costs. This increased the corporate resolve to aid the rise of the “open shop” to battle the union due to the corporate conflict with “overpriced union labor.”^[51]

As early as June 1969, an article in the *Electrical Worker* from local 309 expressed concern about the growth of the “right to work movement,” which aimed at enacting anti-union laws. The article pleaded with younger workers to realize the implications of “right to work,” claiming that out of 19 of the right to work states in existence at that time, only one had a average income above the national average. But, the article offered no means to deal with this problem with except to call upon Congress to repeal section 14 of the Taft-Hartley Act, which permits compulsory open-shop laws. And Local 309 still did not implement any new agendas for organizing. Instead they sought to expand their political work to raise money for COPE (AFL-CIO political action committee) and work with their local legislators. The union consensus at this time was that non-union was non-skilled, and not a rival to union craftsmanship.

Despite the economic problems plaguing most of the country at the time, there were still some opportunities for journeymen to travel to other locals to find work. Some locals did have work opportunities and the 309’s 32-hour workweek proved quite successful.^[52] This shortened workweek allowed more men to be put to work by reducing each mans hours. The local survived as work fluctuated in 1974 and 1975, but work became more difficult to find yet again in 1977. The local faced strikes and layoffs in 1977 and 1978 and severe winters slowed construction to a crawl. Yet, still no major changes were initiated to curtail the growth of non-union outfits. In many cases Illinois building trades were able to still hold on, due to the strong union relationship with state and local legislators. This relationship enabled Local 309 an ability to fight anti-labor legislation, an option that many US locals did not have, or failed to recognize. This cooperation also gave unions the ability to secure federal, state, and local projects.

In any event, new forces such as the ABC (Associated Builders and Contractors), the CIU (Congress of Independent Unions) and the Brown & Root Company were gaining strength. Each of these organizations aimed to directly combat AFL-CIO union work. Conservative legislators and corporations created the mock unions of the ABC

and the CIU in order to undermine construction unions, by essentially repealing the Davis Bacon Act. The Act is “a 1931 law that sets wage standards on all federally funded projects in order to prevent the government from depressing local wages in the competitive bidding process.”^[53] It protects the prevailing wage laws on the federal and state level.

The prevailing wage was and is set by those who have the greatest preponderance of work, and since unions typically held the greatest amount and kept records of their work, they were able to set wages on federal work in labor friendly states. The ABC worked to create a separate prevailing wage for itself and undermine the AFL-CIO. In Illinois, however, they met resistance due to the trade’s strength in the legislature.

In the southern petro-chemical belt, the Business Roundtable mobilized a non-union work force of former white tickets, who had been denied union access. The Roundtable began to aid these inadvertently union-created, non-union workers and deliberately select the non-union construction companies in order to undermine the unions. Since the unions would not organize these individuals, the opposition did. As Artie minor assistant BA and organizer started:

When the Business Roundtable got together and decided to selectively target this work [electrical construction] to deliberately non-union companies, the non-union companies had a work force because they went right to the permit people. And the permit people had no allegiance to the union, so they went straight to work for these companies and had the skills, and that’s where the work stayed. Then they slowly, but surely, dried up those really good union areas that were down south. These areas were very unionized, in fact, their wages were higher than those in the north, which is unheard of anymore because of all of the right to work down there.^[54]

In this petro-chemical corridor, “between Brownsville and Biloxi, there are [presently] 1.3 million non-union construction workers... some 280,000 of them ought to be in the IBEW.”^[55]

In the South, the utter union failure was ominous, but areas such as Illinois still held on. Yet they found the 1980s increasingly more difficult. The cooperation with Illinois legislators provided 309 with a safety net, so it was able to fend off the non-union juggernaut during the trying times of the 1970s and 1980s. Local 309 fared better for it lacked the large-scale ticket worker problem that other regions faced. They also did not have unsympathetic legislators in their region. Yet, 309 still had a multitude of problems.

--The Eighties--

Work for local 309 in March of 1982, was “at an all time low...100 wiremen and apprentices were off and 30 lineman and apprentices were off.”^[56] This was part of a nationwide trend: between 1981-1982 unemployment rates for:

Construction workers was 14.5 percent to 19.4 percent, well above a national percentage of joblessness which had reached a 41-year high in April 1982 of 9.4 percent. The number of joblessness reached a 44-year high in April 1982, 10,307,000 workers. The number of business failures soared to 17,043 the highest in 20 years.^[57]

Local 309’s entry in the *Electrical Worker* advised other IBEW members to “contribute to COPE, help all you can, and register to vote and then vote.”^[58] Because of the state of the country at this time, there was little to no work for anyone, and construction, is typically the first industry to suffer. During the slowdowns in the 1970s there were still certain areas in the country where journeyman could travel and find work, but “the bad thing about the 80s was that there was no place to go... the whole country was in a depression, as far as the construction industry was concerned.”^[59] One 309 wireman stated that in the early 1980s, “for a 2-year stretch I missed about a year’s worth of work... over a third of our local was off.”^[60]

To add to the problems, the Reagan administration helped build non-union competition through administrative cooperation with corporations and non-union groups such as the ABC. “Between 1979 and 1988, ABC officials and their allies managed to repeal mini Davis-Bacon laws in nine of the 41 states that enacted prevailing wage provisions.”^[61] Such efforts resulted in an annual 7.5 percent wage drop within those nine states.^[62] As Mike Faust explained,

The first major threat that we had was in the 1980s, we had pockets of non-union before that, but nothing like what it was like then. It was an invasion... they were getting help from national politics as soon as Reagan got in. He was a very fine actor, he acted real well as president, he acted real well in his B movies, and he acted real well to cut our throats and cut our wages. He helped out the non-union cause as much as anyone in America, through his absence of knowing what was going on and listening to all the corporate people.^[63]

As Don Schmeder suggested, “we had a lot of diversification, a lot of these locals that fell apart only had one product, or one field to work in. Maybe just manufacturing in one specific plant, so when that plant went down the tubes, so went that local. If there was no work in the country you could always go to 309.”^[64] Yet, a stagnating economy combined with the anti-union political atmosphere created a desperate picture for trade unions across the country. As manufacturing and industry began to falter, or move overseas, Local 309 lost much of its strength. While other locals fell apart due to this destruction of the manufacturing all across the country, 309 endured. Local 309 began transforming from an industrial-based local to a commercially-based local. Despite hard times, 309 still resisted organizing.

Especially in hard times, the idea of taking on more men seemed ridiculous to the membership. Mike Faust, BA between 1970 and 1980, commented that, “I am guilty of not organizing, but I thought I could control it... but that’s not true. [The IBEW] was pushing by word alone. They were not aggressively telling you to organize, the reason being, it is in the constitution that you are supposed to go out and organize the unorganized. We should have been doing our job all along, though we weren’t.... We liked our little haven of happiness and didn’t care to share it with too many people was what it was.”^[65] The union survived the 1970s and 1980s, battered, but largely unchanged. The 1990s however, proved to be the turning point for local 309. They now faced the painful choice to either organize, or perish.

--The Nineties--

Between 1965 and 1990, “the electrical construction workforce grew from 200,000 to 550,000, yet International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers membership stayed relatively static at 140,000.”^[66] The IBEW had controlled 80 percent of electrical work nationwide, yet by the 1990s the percentage had decreased by one half.^[67] The market had increased, while the union market share decreased. For a long time, Local 309, like most construction locals, had resisted change and especially organization. The desire for the “country club” atmosphere had to be eradicated, but the question was how?

The international office knew that organization was the key to rebuilding market share. As former President John J. Barry stated, “we had to do something because we could see the slippage in the numbers and the control of work.... Construction locals were in horrendous shape, for the most part, and organizing was a word that was foreign to their vocabularies.”^[68] Considering the diverse situations faced throughout the country organizing would have to be done on the local level. Organization in 309 was still “resisted with great force for many years even, when the big proclamation [from the IBEW calling for locals to devote more effort toward organizing] came down in 1987 it went pretty much unheeded until 1998. Where I was sitting three years ago, I didn’t think that this was going to be a good thing for us,” recalled Artie Minor.^[69] One 309 wireman commented that, “it was just completely opposite of what everybody thought, I didn’t say it out loud, but I thought to myself, it makes sense. I thought... that’s what we should have been doing all along.”^[70]

Local men had to fight their old perceptions of non-union and the somewhat logical idea that “there is only so much work to go around.” Taking on more members without gaining more of the market share would just cause more problems. Consequently, the union would not only have to bring in more non-union people, but it would have to acquire their market as well. Ever pressed by the international office, which had initiated the new COMET (Construction Organizing Membership Education Training) organizing campaign, local 309 finally began to face facts. This IBEW program dictated a plan of attack, but local 309 could organize as it pleased as long as it gained in market share and numbers. The task at hand was complex and burdensome, but 309 was able to make great strides toward changing the way they perceived their situation. 309 could no longer keep its doors closed. It could no longer afford to act in a closed minded manner.

The local had survived up to this point, due to its dedication to COPE and the abundance of work in their area. However, “historically, if it [309] did not have work at the Monsanto plant or at Granite City steel, men were “on the

bench”[laid off].^[71] In the early 1990s these properties provided enough work to keep 309 going. Yet, “over the last 5 or 6 years that complexion has changed, because there hasn’t been any work of great magnitude on either of those properties. The industry kept us going here until about 1995 and then we went commercial.”^[72] The late 1990s brought a new construction boom, but unlike that of the 1960s, this boom was primarily commercially based. White tickets were taken yet again, but the local attempted to take only loyal people as ticket help, and then fully organize them after they had worked for any length of time.

The 309 business office began organizing these white tickets and eventually extended their efforts to organizing local non-union contractors. This was not an easy task however, and the local had to figure out ways to combat non-union influence. 309 implemented a market recovery program, which intertwined organization with target money. The local, for the first time, hired a full-time organizer. This organizer then aggressively worked to take over non-union work, which was primarily residential. The local’s historical indifference toward residential and the smaller work would soon change as it worked to combat the non-union’s stronghold. “Three years ago we were probably down to 4 or 5 guys doing residential work, yet we probably have at least 40 now,” notes Artie Minor.^[73] The local worked to take the top people from these non-union shops, in the hopes that by taking the leaders, others would then follow. In many cases this worked, but the local needed to secure more work, not just take on more people.

To combat this, the union worked to organize entire non-union shops by wearing them down. The union used target money to subsidize a union contractor in order that they could underbid typically cheaper non-union outfits. The union then worked to take a non-union’s top men while undercutting them with target money. This pushed some contractors against a wall and forced them to negotiate. Dave Foree explained, “that once they come to the table and we show them what we have to offer in the way of personnel training and other benefits, that many times closes the deal.”^[74]

Organizer Artie Minor also suggested that the issue of undercutting also pulls non-union contractors to their side. Non-union contractors who themselves are tired of being undercut by other non-union shops agree that, “undercutting is a race to the bottom instead of the top.”^[75] In the effort to get jobs by giving low bids, many outfits are not even making a profit. The counterproductive result of undercutting, “is an argument that you can really get across to a non-union contractor.”^[76]

The efforts of the last three years have resulted in the organization of around 100 formerly non-union electricians. In addition, the local has also begun to pick up more trade school graduates and qualified applicants. Consequently the number of apprentices has soared to more than 100. “The IBEW has gained 16 percent of the market share in the state of Illinois in the last 12 years,” going from 74 percent to 90 percent of the market. This percentage represents the best within the IBEW. “The latest wireman’s contract was for an increase of \$4.50 over 4 years. This time, it was \$5.80 over 4 years, plus the apprentices got a \$4.40 raise. I have every reason to believe that the guy who follows me is going to do even better than that, and the reason is we are controlling more of the market,” boasted Dave Foree.^[77] Yet more work still needs to be done, for as Artie Minor suggests, “if you completely ignore the problem, who knows, you don’t have to drive too far and there’s 40 and 50 man non-union shops in St Louis.”^[78]

--Conclusion--

Ultimately, the 309 members faced a new reality and take a different perspective in relation to organization to save their work. Although, 309 faced less in the way of a direct non-union onslaught, it transformed to protect its smaller work. The local had to fight the old mentality of exclusion and the vision of non-union as the enemy. After all, the non-union men were just performing a job like anyone else. As one wireman suggests, “If a guy knew how to do something then why wouldn’t he be entitled to do it? He is going to do it anyway. If he goes to school and he learns a trade and goes out on the non-union side, he is going to do that work because he is trained to do so, and he doesn’t care whether the union wants him or not. It is gratifying work and it is not just because it is union or non-union work.”^[79]

The 309 membership realized that their mistakes, lost them the market share, and they had to reinvent the way they confronted the non-union challenge. No longer could these contractors just be ignored or intimidated. The contractors were organized, or battled with target money. In addition, the union misconception that non-union people were always less qualified or skilled was becoming a fiction. IBEW electricians realized that despite their extensive

training, some non-union outfits were just as skilled. Wiremen and linemen could no longer speculate that due to their extensive apprenticeship training they could hold a monopoly on the more complex types of work.

Local 309 electricians realized competing in this ever-changing market meant keeping up in every way, from training to organizing. The local made changes, due primarily to the pressure placed on them by their international union. The IBEW for that matter is the present leader in this organizing resurgence in the trades, and its COMET program has influenced all trades. Local 309 survived, but not because it perceived the problems of trade unions before others did. In truth, it acted quite late, but strong cooperation with state and local legislators and a strong work situation enabled them to survive. Even though 309 saw the light, there are still problems in many other areas across the country. Dave Foree suggests that, “even though the IBEW now is going up in numbers at the present time, its market share is not increasing with the market that is out there, so there is still not being enough done, even today. I don’t think this holds presently for this particular area, but it does nationwide.”^[80] In addition, there are still internal problems as well. Some wiremen have still not warmed up to the idea of organization. Another problem is, NECA (National Electrical Contractors Association) has accused Foree of “diluting the market, the membership resisted organization and so did the contractors: they don’t want the competition.”^[81]

In conclusion, 309 did not spearhead any agendas or have the forethought to initiate a progressive movement. What they did do was wait until the last minute to realize that without change they were doomed. Thus this local is an example of how necessary change is for American trade unions, for without drastic measures, unions may cease to exist in this country. Whether people realize this or not, unions set regional wage standards and benefit working people in and outside of the unions, and in every form of labor. Losing organized labor means losing a collective voice of working people.

^[1] This paper is dedicated to the memory of Michael Paul Tongay, decorated Navy firefighter, amateur bullrider, local 309 journeyman tretrimmer and Lineman’s apprentice, father, brother, and son.

This paper was made possible in part by grant from the Undergraduate Research Council. My thanks also to Professor Edmund Wehrle for his guidance and help with this project.

^[2] Don Schmeder, interview by author, Belleville Labor Museum, 10 February 2002.

^[3] Mark Linder, *Wars of Attrition: Vietnam, the Business Round table and the decline of Construction Unions* (Iowa City, 1999) 17.

^[4] A “white ticket” or “card worker” is a person taken off the street to fill a work void for a trade union. This worker is paid the union scale, but receives no benefits or fringes and pays no dues. This ticket worker is not in any way a member of the union.

^[5] A union business agent (BA) is the top executive officer of a local union. The BA negotiates contracts, resolves grievances between workers and contractors, deals with union monetary issues, appoints assistant BAs to represent each of the jurisdictions within the local, and has a myriad of other duties as well.

^[6] Mike Faust, interview by author, Maryville, Ill., 9 February 2002.

^[7] Linder, 18.

^[8] David Foree, interview by author, Southwestern Illinois Building and Construction Trades Council office, Collinsville, Ill., 30 November 2001.

^[9] *Electrical Workers Journal*, January 1967.

^[10] *Electrical Workers Journal*, March 1967.

^[11] “Traveling brothers” are called when certain IBEW locals need a greater workforce, when the local membership can not handle the amount of work. This serves as a helpful tool for IBEW locals, either to call more workers to their jurisdiction, or to send their own men away when local work is slow. Many IBEW members live their entire lives exclusively on traveling, either in the search of big overtime jobs, or to eventually settle in regions with a better pay scale.

^[12] Foree, Interview.

^[13] Ibid.

^[14] Faust, Interview.

^[15] *Electrical Workers Journal*, based on all local 309 admissions between 1966 and 1971.

^[16] Foree, Interview.

^[17] Linder, 40.

- [18] Grace Palladino, *Dreams of Dignity Workers of Vision / a History of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers*, (Washington D.C., 1991), 187.
- [19] Schmeder, Interview.
- [20] Faust, Interview.
- [21] Schmeder, Interview.
- [22] Faust, Interview.
- [23] Ibid.
- [24] John Lorentzen, and Dave Sorge, *309: The History 1902-1977*, 33.
- [25] United States of America v. International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local Union No. 309. No. 69-10, United States District Court; (E.D. Il, July, 3, 1969).
- [26] Schmeder, Interview.
- [27] Faust, Interview.
- [28] A “boomer” was a non union construction worker who traveled across the country looking for large projects that required a mass of manpower.
- [29] Faust, Interview.
- [30] Ibid.
- [31] Ibid.
- [32] Ibid.
- [33] Artie Minor, interview by author, Collinsville, IL, KofC Hall, 20 November 2001.
- [34] David Key, interview by author, Paderborn, IL, 2 December 2001.
- [35] Foree, Interview.
- [36] Faust, Interview.
- [37] *Electrical Workers Journal*, February 1969.
- [38] Schmeder, Interview.
- [39] Ibid.
- [40] Jeff Grabelsky, and Mark Erlich, *Recent Innovations in the Construction Trades*, 169.
- [41] Ibid.
- [42] Ibid.
- [43] Linder, 40-1.
- [44] *Electrical Workers Journal*, February 1971.
- [45] The word “inside” here refers to wiremans work, which represents the bulk of local 309’s work. In technical terms, the wireman’s work jurisdiction begins at the kernys or at the meter, or as the IBEW Constitution states, the wireman controls any work “beginning at the secondary side of the transformer” and that which does not interfere with lineman’s jurisdiction in sec. 4. The wireman’s jurisdiction and training encompasses a massive amount of duties in industrial, commercial, residential construction, and maintenance. The work encompasses lighting from inside to signal, heating and air control, motor control, any and all alarm systems, as well as communications.
- [46] The word “outside” here refers to linemen’s work which deals with utility work or power supply, and this work encompasses a vast array of duties as well. The IBEW Constitution defines their jurisdiction as being over, “the operation, maintenance, and repair of equipment owned or operated by utility employers.” This work in effect covers a vast amount of duties, from building and maintaining substations to setting poles, setting high voltage towers, placing transformers, running underground wire from fiber optics to high voltage.
- [47] *Electrical Workers Journal*, March 1972.
- [48] Lorentzen and Sorge, 48.
- [49] Key, Interview.
- [50] *Electrical Workers Journal*, July 1972.
- [51] Grabelsky. and Erlich, 170.
- [52]

Key, Interview.

[53] Grabelsky and Erlich, 170.

[54] Minor, Interview.

[55] Foree, Interview.

[56] *Electrical Workers Journal*, July 1982.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Key, Interview.

[60] Bacewski, Interview.

[61] Grabelsky and Erlich, 171.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Faust, Interview.

[64] Schmeder, Interview.

[65] Faust, Interview.

[66] Grabelsky and Erlich, 176.

[67] Minor, Interview.

[68] Palladino, 267.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Baczewski, Interview.

[71] Foree, Interview.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Minor, Interview.

[74] Foree, Interview.

[75] Minor, Interview.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Foree. Interview.

[78] Minor, Interview.

[79] Baczewski. Interview.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid.