

The Construction User 2.0 - Episode 18: Construction From a Bird's-eye View, a discussion with Marty Mulcahy

Kirk: Welcome back to The Construction User 2.0. Today's guest is Marty Mulcahy. He's the managing editor of The Building Tradesman, one of the oldest labor union publications in the country. With over 45,000 monthly readers, Marty and The Building Tradesman is the go-to source for labor union news in Michigan and the Great Lakes region. To help us stay updated on everything union labor, please welcome to the podcast Marty Mulcahy.

We always try to start with something a little bit fun. Totally off the subject of anything else, what is the last song you had stuck in your head, like couldn't get free of it walking down the street humming it?

Marty: How about Roam, if you want to, by The B-52's?

Kirk: That's a remarkably good answer. I can't think of much worse things to have stuck in my head than Roam if you want to.

Marty: It's such a great song.

Kirk: It's a good era of music, really.

Marty: I'm a little older, so maybe that's my reference point.

Kirk: That was certainly a younger era. I wasn't around for it, but I was certainly young and in younger school, middle school, when that came out. Tell me a little bit about how you came to The Building Tradesman. What's a little bit of your background? How did you come to where you are?

Marty: I went to Wayne State University back in the 80s, graduated, and was looking for work. I answered a classified ad in one of the local newspapers. Nobody does that anymore. I found a job at a local newspaper in the Downriver Detroit area.

After two-and-a-half years there, I answered another classified ad here at the Detroit Building Trades Council, which was what it was then, and was looking for a staff writer for their local publication. I was hired from among a number of people who applied. That was back in the 80s prior to anything, internet considerations or anything like that. I started back, and it's coming up 34 years now.

Kirk: That's amazing. The Building Tradesman is one of the oldest union publications, and it has a huge subscription. You guys do a really great job with the information you have coming out on a really regular basis every other week.

Marty: It's a fairly limited staff of myself and Joe Hoshaw. He's our advertising director who works at a part time basis. Basically, I put together the entire paper in terms of the editorial, the photos, and so forth, for the most part, or at least acquiring the photos. We use some new service to help with the editorial, but it is a lot. It's quite a bit of work.

It's a very broad industry. It can contain so many things with safety and health issues, work opportunities, and features. There's just a gamut of things that are out there to cover, political things. It's been very interesting and educational. Every time you go to a new publication, you learn something different because something new is always coming out. It's a very interesting field that I've been in doing this, and I really enjoyed over the years.

Kirk: Has it always been a two-, three-person staff that has always been relatively small?

Marty: We used to be published every week back until the early 90s, when budget cuts started hitting everybody, and they decided they prefer to use every other week paper instead of an every week paper.

Back in the 50s—our paper started back in 1952—they really depended on its use. They appreciated the fact that it came out every week. But that became an expensive proposition doing mailing and printing every week, so out came every other week. It's been 30 years now, so it seems to be a pretty good sweet spot for us in terms of our regularity.

Kirk: That makes a lot of sense. Being there as long as you have and seeing everything, you have your finger on the pulse of a lot of things, and seeing a lot of just the world of construction and maintenance in a very broad, interesting view. How is that to see from your angle?

Marty: I have come to really enjoy construction as a topic and as something to look at. Visiting construction sites is just fascinating to me. It's been going to places, the opportunities that I've had to go to, and the things that I've been able to see. Not everybody gets an opportunity to see things as they're being built.

I've enjoyed the opportunity to do that. It's been an enjoyable experience. Seeing things go up is something that construction workers themselves talk to their kids about and talk to their families about going home. When something is built, hey, I had a hand in building that, I built that wall, that building is dry because I put the roof on it, or anything like that.

Not being from the construction industry myself, but with a journalism background, rather than a construction background, I get the same feeling from visiting a construction site if only for the opportunity to visit it while it's going up. Although I don't have an opportunity to do any of the

building, it does give me an opportunity to report on what's going on and highlight some of the work that people are doing.

Kirk: I love that. I heard this interesting anecdote, story, or children's tale a while back. A tradesman, a foreman, and an architect, can all stand on the side of the road and look at a building and say, I built that. All of them are telling the truth, but they had a very different role. To be a part of it through the journalism side of it is another just a very interesting perspective to have.

Marty: It's definitely unique because construction journalism is a fairly limited area of sphere of influence. There are a few major publications, there are more minor publications, and there are probably even less union publications that concentrate on construction than the rest of those combined.

It's a small area, but for the people who do the work, I think they appreciate their work being highlighted in a publication and being able to not only tell somebody as they drive by a building that has been built, hey, I built that, but their picture gets in the paper.

They can also say, hey, the trades paper finally came around. I've been doing this for 30 years, and now I finally get my picture in the paper. It's nice to be able to highlight the work of an individual tradesman.

Kirk: It's an amazing job as well. I've been looking through some of the past issues. It's a great paper. I'm excited to have come across it. I want to ask, labor in general seems to be on the front page of a lot of papers, not just labor papers. Lots of people, everything from the writers' strike in Hollywood and the Teamsters, the new deal with them and UPS, how does all of this increased attention, help, or hurt the construction or other industries? Is all press good? Talk to me a little bit about that?

Marty: You're right in the fact that some colleagues have turned this into a summer of strikes, which hasn't quite come to fruition with the Teamsters and UPS alike. Things going on with Amazon, there's quite a bit of labor strife going on there, with Starbucks, and in other places with people just walking out.

It's been an upheaval within the worker community, but perhaps not so much on a level I've seen decades ago back in maybe the 50s, 60s, or 70s, when strikes were much more prevalent. Strikes themselves are on the upswing a little bit, but they're not nearly as big as they were 30 or 40 years ago.

In the construction industry, strikes are very much a rarity. Over the past few decades, there's a lot less militancy within the construction industry on the part of unions. That's not just in Michigan, it's really nationwide. There are strikes, and they're mostly on a limited basis with individual crafts, but there's been a limited number of them.

I think a good part of that is because there's really been a big focus on labor management relations. I think both sides, and in fact if you want to consider the owners as well, the contractor union community, I think there's been much more in those communities coming together and making agreements that are fair, and really helping foster a better contract negotiation environment. I think it's really made so that construction labor unions might not be so liable to have a strike somewhere, so to speak, as people in other businesses who might feel they're not being treated as well.

Kirk: That tripartite relationship, those three legs of the stool, are really coming together. You can really see and feel that from a management standpoint.

Marty: Absolutely. Since I've been around, that has just only become more of a powerful force within this industry. The labor, the contractors, and the owners, all taking a very active role in, perhaps less negotiations than with the owners. I think they all have a vested interest in making projects work and advancing the industry.

Owners aren't going to get their projects built these days if the contractors aren't out looking for workers in a proactive way. If construction workers aren't being paid well, then they're not going to be able to attract people to the industry. One of the major concerns going out within the industry is attracting personnel. All three legs of that stool do have a vested interest, and it's only gotten more focused, I think, over the years.

Kirk: That's awesome. Besides those high profile cases and the things we're talking about, like you said, there are a lot of things going on in the news, but it isn't really related to the construction industry as much because we have those relationships, and those are more of a rarity in this industry. What are the other stories that listeners should be aware of? What are the things going on in the building trades that are a little bit more pressing to the front?

Marty: These days, I can say that the attraction of workers to the industry is probably the most important long-term concern of a lot of people. There are a lot of people retiring. A lot of us baby boomers are going off into the sunset. They are very concerned with who's going to be the next generation of people.

They're really out there trying to hit high schools and whatever other places they can find people, where they're coming up to try to convince them. Whether it's other types of trade schools, whether it's non-union job sites, they're looking for people to fill these slots so that these projects can get built. There are a lot of projects out there to be built.

I think the attraction and looking for people to the industry is perhaps the biggest thing that you see in the news these days. Even in the media, they have all types of work put out there.

There's a summer camp going up in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, for example. They've got a lot of kids up there going out of high school or in high school learning about things like

electrical work, iron work, plumbing, and learning the trade a little bit for a few weeks during the summer. That exposure is they're just trying to expose kids to the industry. I think that's part of what the mainstream media is also looking at.

Kirk: Labor supply is definitely on the front of a lot of people's minds. That seems to be a big thing. Is that our biggest battle? Are there other battles that we aren't as much talking about that may be coming down? Are there other things that we should know about?

Marty: I don't know about battles. I think, maybe the number one issue is retention and attraction of tradespeople to the industry. The other things that are really important to the safety issues to my eye, they're almost being taken care of by those aforementioned contractors and owners for the most part.

You can't say that for every project, but the intense interest in safety on the part of contractors and on the part of owners who are making those issues that really are ingrained in their philosophies, that's something that you saw decades ago, where construction fatalities and injuries rates are coming down. It's because of the intense focus on safety, training, and having these conversations at job sites.

You see the slogans all around that unsafe work will not be tolerated and things of that nature. That's something important to get out of the way, if you will, because everybody wants to be able to go home at the end of the day, see their family, and not be a statistic.

In terms of things that construction workers would like people to know about, or the construction industry might want the greater public to know about, I think the safety issues and the workforce issues are, in a larger way, getting taken care of. There are probably some other areas like roadwork. This is such a broad industry in construction.

I just drove by a roadside worksite yesterday, and there's a flagger putting his hands up and down telling drivers to slow down. He held up the slow sign and was physically telling everybody to slow down. I've never seen that before.

If you're going to be looking at something where the construction industry is concerned about, these little smaller areas of the business, the roadwork, that's going to be a constant worry. But the safety overall, I think, is really headed in the right direction.

Kirk: That's awesome. One of our previous guests on the show was Senator John Cherry, and he came in to talk about the labor legislation, specifically in Michigan, and the work being done with the workers in Lansing and Washington DC. Are the legislative gains we've seen under that current administration looking good for the future? What do you think the climate there is? Are we going to keep moving forward? What's the administrative climate about labor laws?

Marty: Michigan, as you may know, was the legislature that the house in the Senate flipped from Republican control to Democratic control. The governor has been a Democrat. The Democratic

governor Whitmer has been the governor during that time and remains so today. It's a Democrat control for the first time in Lansing since the early 80s.

There's been a sea change in the laws that have been adopted, although labor, I think, might want things to move a little bit quicker in a few select issues. But for the most part, the repeal of Right-to-Work in Michigan and the reimplementation of prevailing wage, were both major. The big two have already been flipped for organized labor. There is no more Right-to-Work in Michigan. For the construction industry, we have a prevailing wage law to work with again.

There's still time left in the legislation. They've got another year-and-a-half of control by the Democrats and more pro-labor pro-worker legislators. There are probably some other things on the agenda that will be pushed for by organized labor, including 20 weeks of jobless insurance that was lowered from 26 weeks back 15 or 20 years ago by the GOP legislature.

Michigan was the first state to have their unemployment benefit weeks shortened. That's going to be one of the things that they're going to be looking at, I'm sure. Some changes in the workers compensation laws might be on the agenda pushed by organized labor.

There might be some other licensing and regulation things that are going to be looked at, too, that were changed over the years. I think that labor is going to be pushing to do some of the B-tier things besides prevailing wage and right-to-work. They're going to be pushing some of the things to get done while they still have the control in Lansing.

Kirk: Obviously, no one has a crystal ball. They push these things through in a year-and-a-half. Is it looking like it is going to stay Democrat? Do you think it might go back? If it goes back, do you think we'll lose some of those advancements? What is the climate? How is a lot of this being received?

Marty: There's a matter of two Democratic lawmakers who have run for local office in Michigan. They both advanced in the primary the other day. There's a good chance, or at least somewhat of a chance, that there could be a 56-56 tie in the house, which would create a shared power situation.

There are a few question marks about what would happen then. If both of those legislators, one local office and left the legislature, then there will be a period before the governor could call a special election for replacing them. Long-term, I think most people expect that for the next year-and-a-half, it's going to be a legislature that's run by more pro-worker, pro-labor Democrats.

I think the expectation is that that's going to be what happens. But one never knows when there's such a razor-thin margin in the legislature. There's illness, there are auto accidents. You just never know when you're dealing with folks in the legislature. Anything can happen when you have such a thin margin of majority in the House, both the House and the Senate.

Kirk: The weather can change quickly with a lot of different factors, so I definitely hear that. In your job, like we talked about at the beginning, you put out a paper every two weeks covering labor stories for all union construction across Michigan. You have 45,000 readers. Staying up on important labor stories, how do you stay current on the industry? What determines what gets the column inches and the pages? How do you stay ahead of that?

Marty: The political environment has been a source of tremendous amounts of fodder over the past six months. It's less so now that the legislature is out for summer.

For example, the first six months, it was shocking to have a pro-labor legislature in there with the Democrats taking full control for the first time in 40 years. Having done that, the amount of potential changes that have been bandied about made quite a bit of information available to report on, including the Right-to-Work repeal and the effects of having a prevailing wage back that can play.

The political realm has been a great source of information. The jobs that are out there themselves have been really a good source of information as well. We're a statewide publication. Michigan has just been one of the leaders among the states in construction activity and adding new construction workers over the past couple of years because of the amount of work that's going on.

Between the political environment and the work itself, some of the things that really have brought about, given the ideas for articles, photos, and things like that, that's driven a lot of the information that's gotten into the paper.

Kirk: Awesome. Would you have any recommendations to all the listeners, all the people in construction? Any recommendations on how to filter that, how to stay on top of what's coming down the pipe and what's not that important to pay attention to? Any recommendations there?

Marty: Everybody has their own preferred source of information. When it comes to filtering things, I also say, with a union construction newspaper, you're going to be having your information filtered through a union construction lens. Obviously, everybody has a different filter with both mainstream media. There's also secular stuff with all sorts of social issues and things like that.

I'm not going to sit here and tell you that what you see in The Building Tradesman paper is an unvarnished, clean truth of construction information. What I'm telling you is that it's viewed through a union construction lens and what's important to the health, safety, well-being, and financial well-being of our members.

It's not necessarily going to be 100% straight up information. If you want religious information, maybe you go to a church paper. If you want information on gun rights, go to your National Rifle Association publication, meeting, or anything like that. If you want union-oriented news from the

building trades perspective, then you get The Building Tradesman in your mailbox every other week. It's all there for you if you want to read it.

Kirk: That is very true. It's awesome to have gotten to have this conversation with you. I really just appreciate you having the time. Again, I think what you are doing out there with your publication is just fantastic. I'm excited to have found it. Thank you so much for coming on.

Marty: Glad to do it. I appreciate the work that you folks at the TAUC do. I'm an avid listener, and I wish you continued success.

Kirk: Thank you so much for your time.