

## The Residential Builders Association Rehabilitated

Time was when the Residential Builders Association (RBA) was a central political power in San Francisco; then followed a time when it was a pariah.

Now both times have passed, and the RBA is back, not quite again what it was politically, but again a challenge for us.

Born more than thirty years ago among Irish contractors in the City, the RBA reached power under the leadership of Joe O'Donohue, whose outsized personality alternated charm and menace, erudition and crudity. Most of the RBA's members were non-union, and it found itself frequently in conflict with the Building Trades. O'Donohue famously left an answering machine message for one of my predecessors, Stan Smith, Sr., that included the wish that he would "bust a kidney and die." The RBA's website was filled with O'Donohue's verses. Straining syntax, he wielded them like a shillelagh against those he deemed his enemies. Larry Mazzola, Sr., President of this Council, merited two cantos. Mayor Gavin Newsom earned a few lines questioning his sexual orientation.

But O'Donohue was effective. He presided over the transformation of a ragged band of contractors into a thriving alliance of developers. He led them in the successful ballot effort to carve out a new Department of Building Inspection (DBI) from the Planning Department. Thereafter the DBI was reputed to be his seat of power, and it was even alleged that he involved himself in the morning dispatch of inspectors. He appeared to have the ear of Mayor Willie Brown and often appeared onstage with him. Under Brown the RBA carried out one of its most successful and at the same time infamous endeavors, the construction of scores of "live-work loft" buildings in formerly industrial areas of the City.

Then came a series of missteps and bad turns. The RBA backed Matt Gonzalez against Gavin Newsom in the campaign to succeed Brown as mayor. Some of its members at a public hearing of the Building Inspection Commission questioned the effect of pregnancy on the judgment of DBI's interim director, Amy Lee. The press began talking of corruption at DBI, and the FBI undertook investigations. Although the investigations had very limited outcomes ultimately, in combination with those other factors and with the animosity the live-work lofts had inspired they helped render the RBA nearly toxic for politicians. In short order O'Donohue was gone from his leadership role.

Now his successor, Sean Keighran, is proving himself effective in his own less theatrical way. The RBA website has been modernized and professionalized. Absent are the vituperative verses and the centrality of personality. Keighran can make genuine assertions on behalf of the RBA's members. Some of them can claim the same hardscrabble origins that many of us in the Building Trades can claim. No one can deny their real virtues, the ethic of hard work and production that is a close cousin to our own, the intelligence and charm of many of their members, the up-by-the-bootstraps histories of some, the loyalty to Church and clan.

At the same time, they are among the foremost adherents in San Francisco to what my distant Gallic cousins would call "savage capitalism," devoted to the freest of markets, irked by any hint of regulation. I recall thinking as an Ironworker organizer visiting their jobs how many of them would be shut down if Cal-OSHA visited them as often as it did ours. As a Building Inspection Commissioner I listened to them argue against dust control measures that most of us would consider routine, in most cases involving little more than a Laborer with a hose and a blue tarp with a few stakes.

As unions represent a check on the tendency of the free market to increase profit at the expense of wage earners, the RBA's use of union labor has in general been casual, at best. Its members use us when we have skills they cannot obtain as well elsewhere. They use us in those few instances when our signatory contractors can underbid non-union competitors with underpaid workers.

Even the few union-signatory members of the RBA follow this course when unconstrained by the subcontracting clauses of our master agreements. Recently when I allowed the Council's name to be used in a letter from the San Francisco Labor Council opposing a project that included a non-union supermarket under the mistaken supposition that the project sponsor as an RBA member was not signatory with the Carpenters, he wrote to Building Trades President Larry Mazzola, a Plumber, to Vice President John O'Rourke, an Electrician, and to myself, an Ironworker, to complain that he had always been a union contractor and that he should not have had such treatment from the unions. In a lunch meeting brokered by the Carpenters I told the sponsor, "Look, I'd like to help you, but it would be a lot easier if you'd tell me that the job will be all-union."

"I build union," he told me, "except sometimes for the Plumbers, the Electricians, and the Ironworkers, and that's just a question of the price."

And so we are brought into conflict with the RBA. That conflict may be more polite than it was in the time of O'Donohue's leadership, but it is real. We will picket their jobs. We will oppose their projects. We have no choice. Not only do most of us in the Building Trades believe that we still belong in small residential construction, but the RBA has moved well beyond that market now. They have built mixed-use and even fully commercial projects. They have done commercial remodels and retrofits. They have even done multi-story poured-in-place jobs with a mix of union and non-union contractors.

The RBA is achieving a political comeback. At a dinner for the San Francisco Democratic Party at the Mark Hopkins Hotel shortly before the November election they had two tables, with a San Francisco Supervisor seated at each. When I remarked to one of these Supervisors later that he was friendly with the RBA, he said, "But I'm friendly with the Building Trades, too," as though we and the RBA were equivalent.

We are not equivalent.

Through our apprenticeships and pre-apprenticeships, the Building Trades provide formal training for San Francisco residents and a true gateway to a nationwide network of construction careers. The RBA does not. We have obtained health care benefits for our members and their families and thereby have supported and not strained the City's health care system. The RBA has not. We have gained defined-benefit pensions for our workers and assured them a comfortable and dignified retirement. The RBA has not. We are in so many ways aligned with what are held to be "San Francisco values"; The RBA is in so many ways antithetical to them.

And in a very profound way the RBA's success owes itself to ours, but the RBA benefits without paying its due. The RBA functions in a market that we have created. The prices it charges, the profits it makes are sustained by what union-friendly developers are able to get. In a more cutthroat, devil-take-the-hindmost, truly free market, with labor costs driven down and developers grabbing whatever advantage they can, the RBA would not be nearly as successful. This is just one of the ironies inherent in savage capitalism.

What the RBA brings to politics is money, and it is in the nature of our system that money sooner or later and by one rationalization or another finds an audience among politicians.

Even so, while there is no equivalency between us and the RBA, there is a relationship: The work. We have sweated the same in dealing with the same tasks, the same hard materials. We have suffered the same discomforts. We have felt the same pride in looking at our finished product. We are as brothers in the work who have been estranged by faith &ndash; theirs in the divinity of the Market, ours in the solidarity of our class.

Some ecumenicalism may yet be possible, some bridge between the faiths. We in the Building Trades are certainly open to discussing it. In the meantime, we will do as we must to protect the standard of living of our members.