

ABI COLLECTIVE – Our best organizer!

THIS PIECE WAS COMMISSIONED BY THE 2023 GUEST EDITOR MARISA CORTRIGHT. IT MARKS THE CULMINATION OF HER EDITORIAL PROJECT THAT SOUGHT TO ARTICULATE THE CONCERNS OF ARCHITECTURAL WORKERS ORGANIZING AGAINST INJUSTICE.

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A patched-up bullet hole next to the newly regilded ornamentation at Al-Ishaqeyyah Mosque, July 17, 2019. Courtesy of the author.

The largest attempt to unionize public- and private-sector architects in the United States was made in the early twentieth century by the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians (FAECT, sometimes pronounced like “fact”). [1] FAECT documented their organizing efforts through a bulletin—twenty offset-printed pages with spot color published monthly from 1934 to 1938 and distributed to their readership of 7,000 to 8,000 members in over twenty major cities. [2] Despite their prominence at this time and the contributions of major players in US modernism—Lewis Mumford, Frank Lloyd Wright, Percival Goodman, Rudolph Schindler—FAECT and its bulletin are relatively obscure today. [3]

Our group, the Alternative Building Industry (ABI) Collective, was formed in 2022, when engineer members of the IFPTE [4] convened architectural laborers from the Architecture Lobby and science workers from

[1] FAECT may have been an acronym (pronounced “fact”) or an initialism (spelled out “F-A-E-C-T”). While discussing this research with current members of IFPTE, it was suggested that it may have been an acronym rather than an initialism; it remains to be confirmed whether the pronunciation is anachronistic.

[2] Baltimore, Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Jersey City, Los Angeles, Madawaska, Milwaukee, Newark, New York City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Rochester, South Bend, St. Paul, San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Westchester, Youngstown. See Tony Schuman, “Professionalization and the Social Goals of Architects: A History of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists and Technicians,” in *The Design Professions and the Built Environment*, ed. Paul L. Knox (London: Helm, 1988), 15. The title of this essay, “Our best organizer!” is taken from a Subscription advertisement in the Summer 1935 issue of the Bulletin.

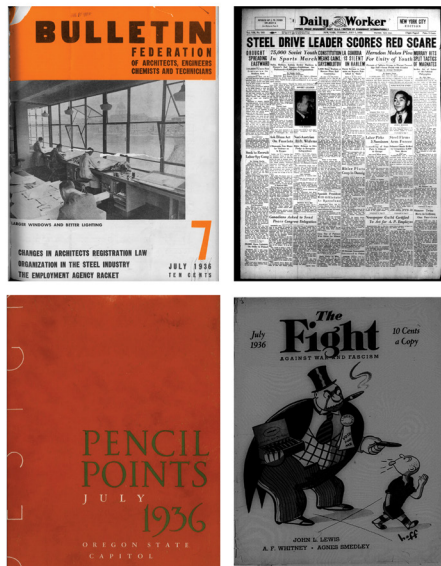
Science for the People (SftP) to discuss how we could better collaborate in our organizing for climate justice. We shared a common motivation to discuss the political consequences of our technical work. We came across FAECT as we debated how a broad-based labor movement across the building sector could simultaneously address workplace and social issues—remaking our coalition of architects, engineers, and scientists from a scattering of professionals into a viable political constituency.

We found the only complete set of the FAECT Bulletin in the collections of the New York Public Library. An enterprising ABI Collective member scanned them, then distributed the scanned copies among our group and circles of friends. In the Bulletin, almost ninety years since its publication, we found a world close to our own: architects experiencing the abuses of the atelier system, organizing against racialized exclusion, fearing automation, [5] and observing mounting ecological devastation. And we also find a world unlike our own—where workers from across disciplines organize together for both their working conditions and a worker-led transformation of the built environment. As we organize to equitably meet climate goals by the 2030s, we look back at the lessons of the 1930s. We look to FAECT.

[3] Other researchers who have addressed FAECT include: Mardges Bacon, "The Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists and Technicians (FAECT): The Politics and Social Practice of Labor," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 76, no. 4 (2017): 454–63; Schuman, "Professionalization and the Social Goals of Architects," 12–31; Edith Dana Hind, "The Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists and Technicians: A Study of a Professional Union" (Master's thesis, Columbia University, 1937); Peggy Deamer, "Architectural Unionization: 'The Missing Unions of Architectural Labor,'" in *Architecture and Labor* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 89–96.

[4] IFPTE is the union from which FAECT's original members had been expelled.

[5] What we call automation today was, in the 1930s, referred to as "mechanization."



Issues of the FAECT Bulletin, Pencil Points, and Engineering News-Record from the summer of 1936. FAECT's Bulletin picks up on the formation of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee within the CIO, as does the Daily Worker. Pencil Points prints "Monograph series."

Build the Bulletin

Leftist publishing throughout the United States surged in the 1930s. Subscribers to the FAECT Bulletin may have received the publication in the same bundle of mail as the Daily Worker, a more overtly radical publication of the Communist Party, or The Fight, the monthly publication of the American League Against War and Fascism. Tellingly, the headline articles of the FAECT Bulletin covered the same national labor news as its leftist counterparts, in between articles about its membership's bread-and-butter concerns. The July 1936 issues of the Bulletin, The Fight, and the Daily Worker all feature the formation of the Steel Workers Organizing Committee within the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). This sits in contrast to the professional publications of the day. The architectural journal Pencil Points reprinted the results of the design

competition for Oregon's State Capitol, bemoaning the "mental laziness" of the entrants as "poor salesmanship" for the architectural profession. [6] While the Bulletin's readership included many architects, its primary concern was the political potential of organized technical workers.

By the time FAECT was founded on August 23, 1933, tensions had been simmering in architectural and engineering offices for over a decade. [7] In Pencil Points, draftsmen expressed frustrations throughout the 1920s regarding unstable employment, low wages, and long hours. [8] They were met, however, by the more established—and often patronizing—architects, who suggested little more than improved training and technique to ameliorate bad working conditions. Proposals by draftsmen to organize a union were dismissed as antithetical to the nature of the profession. [9] These political disagreements in Pencil Points were further exacerbated by changing labor conditions that created a class of "employee" architects, who retained an identification with the "gentlemanly" image of the society architect but were employed as wage labor by another architect.

It wasn't only architects with professional disappointments; in 1924, the Daily Worker lamented poor working conditions of "engineering workers" and called for an "educational and agitational" campaign to organize them. [10] Shortly before the founding of FAECT, in 1932, the architectural intelligentsia in New York City published Architects and the Crisis—a sister publication to the better-known Culture and the Crisis—to urge architects to "ally [themselves] with the workers, the bulk of the people, whose misery urgently [demanded] the abolition of the capitalist system." [11] FAECT inherits this legacy; Percival Goodman, coauthor of Architects and the Crisis, would also be an early organizer of FAECT. [12]

[6] Walter H. Thomas, "The Oregon State Capitol Competition: Some Remarks Concerning Its Results." Pencil Points, July 1936.

[7] "A Brief History," Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians 1, no. 1 (February 1934): 2.

[8] George Barnett Johnston, Drafting Culture: A Social History of Architectural Graphic Standards (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 55.

[9] Johnston, Drafting Culture, 85.

[10] J. I. Obsky, "Engineering Workers under Capitalism," Daily Worker, September 6, 1924 [link](#).

[11] League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, Architects and the Crisis: An Open Letter to the Architects, Draughtsmen, and Technicians of America (New York: Architects' Committee of the League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, 1932).

[12] Although Goodman was heavily involved in the formation of FAECT, as a principal of a private architecture firm, he was barred from membership. Nonetheless, his office was one of the earliest private-sector firms to unionize. See Kimberly J. Elman and Angela Giral, eds., Percival Goodman: Architect, Planner, Teacher, Painter (New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University in the City of New York, 2001), 168, [link](#).

DO YOU SUFFER FROM HEADACHES?



A recent survey by neurologists showed that 67% of technical men are the victims of headaches and other nervous disorders. The neurologists do not know the reason.

The BULLETIN is conducting its own survey to discover who the other 33% are who do not have headaches. Conditions among technical men are enough to give anyone a headache, what with wage rates of \$94 a month, speed up and unemployment.

A Bromo Seltzer or some other sedative won't cure it. You've got to have something that attacks the trouble at its roots.

SO we give you THE BULLETIN

Since its inception the BULLETIN has been the one force fighting for better conditions for technical men. It has been responsible for organization in many cities. It has been the one resolute spokesman for the technical employee.

IF YOU BELIEVE IN THE ORGANIZATION OF TECHNICAL MEN,

BUILD The Bulletin!



READ IT!

SUBSCRIBE TO IT!



If you know a technical man in some other city, have the BULLETIN sent to him.

10 East 17th Street
C. A. E. C. V.
New York City.

Enclosed find one dollar for which you will please send me monthly for the next year the BULLETIN OF THE F. A. E. C. V.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

(check) I AM A MEMBER _____

I AM NOT A MEMBER _____

Professional classification _____

Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians 2, no. 6 [November 1935].

The Bulletin was the mouthpiece for these views, and a place to debate them. The first issue of the Bulletin was published in February 1934, about six months after the union was formed. The Bulletin overcame this lag and got right to work documenting the union's creation while giving it an identity, a voice, and a venue. The Bulletin had a strong graphic style—much more akin to Pencil Points than The Fight—and balanced a professional tone with the use of satire to lampoon its opponents. Each issue provided analyses and editorials on the contradictions of modernizing America, posed discipline questions for different technical workers, and included reviews of national policies and labor news—alongside advertisements that spoke to the pressing need for funding. The Bulletin also featured letters, satirical pieces, critical reviews of notable books like Catherine Bauer's *Modern Housing*, and technical trade publications. The Bulletin was a public forum moderated by the most active organizers in FAECT.

The formation and rise of FAECT cannot be separated from the ideological climate of the Great Depression. In addition to the reforms of the New Deal, it was a period when millions of workers were organized into unions, aided by the National Labor Relations Act of 1934. There was a powerful Left, energized by affiliation with the Communist Party, that leveraged prevailing social concerns, including racism, unemployment, and widespread evictions, to organize across a wide variety of industries. Many architects went to work for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and other government programs, and these federally employed architects formed a core constituency within FAECT throughout the Depression.

As the Depression waned, FAECT reshaped itself to prepare for its absorption into the CIO. The Bulletin was renamed *Technical America*. [13] As part of this rebrand, editors polled subscribers: "What's Wrong with Technical America?" One federation member responded: "We have felt all along that Technical America is entirely too pretentious," [14] indicating the long-standing divide between the more radical politics of FAECT's leadership and the concerns of the rank and file—and a divide that became harder to ignore as the publication and the union moved closer to mainstream unionism.

[13] Beginning in November 1937.

[14] "What's wrong with TA?" *Technical America* 5, no. 9 (September 1938): 2.

But, throughout its entire history, the Bulletin was an organizing tool, building a shared identity and understanding between a disparate set of workers. A similar project is meaningful today. The Bulletin, however, thrived in a time when the media landscape was less fractured. In the present, any organizer on the Left or in labor knows the headache of participating in a multitude of email listservs, discussion groups, and social media platforms—each tuned to a specific (and often peculiar) political milieu.

Still, the need for organizing mediums like the Bulletin persists. Member groups of the ABI Collective have diverse approaches: SftP runs a magazine and a web platform, while the Architecture Lobby publishes pamphlets and lectures at universities. It is difficult to construct today as unified a media project as the Bulletin represented then. Nevertheless, the project of building an identity and constituency remains. For the ABI Collective, this is all practitioners of technical and manual skills whose work relates to buildings. For FAECT, this subject was the "technical worker."

FROM AN EMPLOYER
 Editor's Note: Mr. Okum was refused membership in the Federation because he is an employer.
 Dear Friends:
 Permit me to congratulate you upon your correct decision not to accept me as a member of your organization. This action proves to me, to my great satisfaction, that four years of starvation has finally taught you the lesson that architects or engineers, or chemists, are not one great big happy family where a young graduate is merely obtaining his practice so as to enter into private practice as soon as the period of apprenticeship is completed.
 Henceforth, you will know that you are employees forever, (when there is work) and that your interests are diametrically contrary and opposed to those who employ you.

Gentlemen, I must come to an end. Let me say a word in closing, that it is in your power not only to advance your own economic position, but it is in your power to form the leadership of the entire building and technical industry of the United States. Nay, it is within your reach to insure the peace of the world, by uniting into ONE powerful militant union of architects, engineers, chemists, and technicians.
 Sincerely yours,
 A. H. Okum (signed)
 Registered Architect
 Licensed Civil Engineer

P.S. I am enclosing a clipping from your Pencil Points. You ought to send a protest against such insertions.

OPPORTUNITY: For an earnest beginner desiring practical experience in office of architect in Brooklyn, N. Y. Must apprentice for a year without pay. Box No. 1206, care of Pencil Points.
It's against the N.A.A.

The first issue of the FAECT Bulletin, from February 1934, ends with correspondence from an employer: "Permit me to congratulate you upon your correct decision not to accept me as a member of your organization. This action proves to me, to my great satisfaction, that four years of starvation has finally taught you the lesson that architects or engineers, or chemists, are not one great big happy family..."

Constructing the Technical Worker

The federation sought solidarity across its membership of architects, engineers, chemists, and technicians. While the employer/employee distinction effectively described relations within individual professions or offices, FAECT needed to promote a cross-disciplinary identity that was stronger than any preexisting affinity these workers felt with management. To unite disparate forms of labor, the Bulletin appealed to the "technical worker," a colloquialism that had gained traction in the early twentieth century. Though imprecisely defined, the term was often associated with "office work," denoting white-collar employment in "scientific" or "industrial" fields. It also distinguished "modern" labor from nineteenth-century trades, such as carpentry and printing, though both were considered to be "skilled," and sometimes it was contrasted with forms of professional employment, such as doctors or lawyers. [15] By the 1920s, the term was commonly associated with the still-broad field of engineering, described by a Daily Worker journalist as encompassing "draftsmen, designers, inspectors, supervisors, engineers, architects, [and] chemists." [16]

The idea of the technical worker—or as it was often expressed, the "technical man"—was hard-fought. The patriarchal structure of the atelier system had shielded the architectural office from unionization and erected artificial distinctions between drafting labor and other forms of technical work. [17] It was these distinctions that FAECT worked to break down, fielding an impressive arsenal of satire, lampoon, and moral appeal. In "Are Architects Human?" Roy Weber, leader of the architects' section of FAECT, humorously critiqued architects' unwillingness to advocate for themselves. He questioned whether "the atelier, the charette, [and] the cocktail parties with the boss" had left architects uninterested in advocating for improved working conditions. [18] The Bulletin featured the recurring comic character Sylvester Heminhaw, [19] who is perpetually getting laid off, yet protests that trade unions are "hardly compatible with professional dignity and ethics." [20] Sylvester is to FAECT what Mr. Block was to the Industrial Workers of the World, the hapless worker who "kisses that boot that kicks him" and a cautionary tale of a worker uncon-

[15] Jonas Howard, "What Does Mystic 'Rx' Mean? Symbol of Doctor's Promise," Chicago Daily Tribune, November 22, 1908; William Gardam, "Industrial Specialization: The American Artisan of Today Labors under Conditions That Carry Dangers as Well as Benefits," Detroit Free Press, July 11, 1909; Gardam, "Technical Education: It Is Playing an Important Part in the Industrial Race between the United States, England and Germany," Detroit Free Press, April 3, 1910, [link](#).

[16] Obsky, "Engineering Workers under Capitalism," [link](#).

[17] George Barnett Johnston, "Drafting Room Journal: Dialectics of the Architect and the Draftsman in Pencil Points, 1920–1932," in Johnston, Drafting Culture, 84–85, [link](#).

[18] Roy Weber, "Are Architects Human?" Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians 4, no. 6 (June 1937): 10–11.

[19] On occasion, his name is "Sylvester Heminham."

scious of his class position. [21]

Parallel to the use of humor to describe what the technical worker was not, the Bulletin used appeals to pride in one's labor and contributions to societal progress to build a positive identity for technical workers. FAECT's constitution, published as a frontispiece in some issues of the Bulletin, celebrated how the "development of the United States is founded upon technical skill." In turn, the federation argued that it fought for "the standard of living and economic security to which [technical workers'] training and achievements justly entitle them." [22]



[20] "Introducing Sylvester Heminhaw," Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians 3, no. 10 (October 1936): 15.

[21] Ernest Riebe, Mr. Block: Twenty-Four I.W.W. Cartoons, ed. Franklin Rosemont (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1984).

[22] "Constitution of Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians," Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians 3, no. 3 (March 1936): 16.

The Bulletin interrogated the role and position of the architect, in ways just as relevant today as in the 1930s. FAECT Bulletins pictured here: "Must Architects Be Plowed Under?," April 1934; "The Architect in Private Industry," November 1935; "Are Architect's Human?," June 1937, and "Mechanizing the Architect," April 1938.

Identifying as technical workers also grounded their solidarity with other union workers and with working class politics more broadly. It was on that basis that FAECT practiced solidarity with the United Automotive Workers (UAW) strikes in 1938. Michel, a FAECT representative working with UAW on their campaign, explained that the relationship between the technical worker and the production worker should be cooperative rather than hierarchical. While technical workers planned the work, they relied on production workers to carry it out; both were "in the same relationship to Management" and both were subject to exploitation. Despite this shared condition, Michel noted that technical workers trailed behind production workers, who had already discovered that "their only hope of obtaining a fair share of the proceeds of their labor was to organize and bargain collectively." [23]

Michel's assertion was intended to motivate organization among technical workers, who may have been trained to look upon production workers as subservient or unskilled. While production workers had "been making this progress in the face of concerted opposition from management," the tendency of the technical worker to affiliate with management had failed to produce its promised benefit, leaving the status of the technical worker "virtually

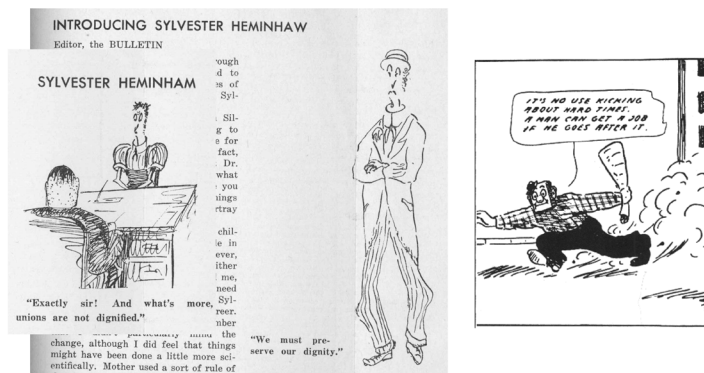
[23] "Michel on Technicians: The UAW Representative of FAECT Auto Drive Treats the Economic Position of the Technician in Modern Production," Technical America 5, no. 4 (April 1938): 10.

unchanged.” [24] FAECT highlighted that the benefits accrued from self-identification with the employer-class were illusory, and the benefits of identifying as a worker were material.

FAECT’s ability to leverage the semantic fluidity of the “technical worker” in service of cross-industry solidarity was contingent on a historical moment where these nascent forms of labor lacked rigid institutional distinction. While in the 1920s, a newspaper columnist could equate the chemist and the designer, the same comparison would be confusing if made today. Although history appears to have foreclosed on this organizing strategy, it nonetheless provides important lessons for the present. While the disciplinary flexibility of the architecture, engineering, and construction industries may have faded, we’re reminded that the rigid boundaries between what have become established professions are manufactured and obscure the reality that our labor is more similar than different. On that basis, the ABI Collective advocates for the organization of all practitioners within the building industry together. [25]

[24] “Michel on Technicians.”

[25] “Home,” ABI Collective, August 27, 2023, [link](#).



Continuing in the tradition of the International Workers of the World (IWW), the Bulletin used satire for political effect. FAECT Bulletins pictured here: “Sylvester Heminhaw,” September 1936; “Question—If we have slum clearance, where will Architects live???” June 1935; Sylvester Heminhaw, October 1936, Mr. Block.

Gender, Race, and FAECT

FAECT held its first national convention in the last days of 1934, rooted in the “imperative to extend, strengthen, and unify our organization nationally.” [26] The subjectivity of the technical worker was debated, extended, and challenged—both in the convention sessions and, perhaps more importantly, outside of them. A notable outcome of the first FAECT convention was the publication of the group’s position on racial segregation in and beyond the technical profession.

This publication was not planned but arose from the circumstances on the ground. Near the beginning of the convention, the host hotel refused two Black conventiongoers the use of the hotel’s passenger elevators. The conventioners quickly sent a special delegation to the hotel management, stating that “unless the Negroes were permitted unrestricted use of the premises, the Convention as well as the delegates, who were housed in the hotel, would move ‘bag and baggage’ to other quarters.” [27] The hotel backed down, and FAECT reported their victory over the hotel’s discriminatory policy in the next issue of the Bulletin.

But in the Bulletin, as at the convention, issues of race were often

[26] Lewis A. Berne et al., eds., “Call to the Convention,” Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians 2, no. 1 (January 1935): 3.

[27] Jules Korchien, “Convention Notes,” Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians 2, no. 3 (May 1935): 4.

present but rarely center stage. Some articles, however, indicate that it was a driving concern in local chapters. In a 1937 issue, Milton Fischer of the Washington, DC, chapter wrote that “the Negro technician faces a two-fold problem: Not only is he affected by the general adverse economic set-up that faces the technical man, but he must also deal with the problem of racial discrimination that plagues his every effort.” [28] Together with others from the DC chapter, Fischer presented FAECT’s position on “The Technical Man” at a 1937 conference at Howard University, proposing mass organization of technical workers as the best solution to workforce discrimination. In a 1938 issue of the *Bulletin*, Fischer advocated that FAECT join the National Technical Association—an organization of Black technical workers—in endorsing the ill-fated (and now obscure) Federal Workers Appeal Act, which would have given workers the ability to appeal unfair or discriminatory treatment while in federal civil service. [29]

While FAECT’s position on race and racism was progressive for its time, it had a typical (which is to say, retrograde) position on gender. The *Bulletin* demonstrated an ambiguous idea of the role of women in technical work. In the inaugural issue of the *Bulletin*, things were looking up; Lewis Mumford’s foreword called out to both the “men and women” in union ranks and, a few years later, a 1937 article celebrated the “emergence of women, both in production and in the home, as a decisive force affecting the campaign in the unions.” [30] On the ground, however, the FAECT Women’s Auxiliaries, formalized in 1937, were discussed in the *Bulletin* as a support organization of members’ wives attached to each local chapter, not as technical workers themselves.

In a column recurring throughout 1938, first titled “Auxiliary News” and later retitled to “With Our Women,” the *Bulletin* celebrated how the Women’s Auxiliaries “demonstrated their capacity to serve in the interests of technical men.” [31] While women in FAECT were not invited to identify with the “technical worker,” they were central to the organizing work of the federation. After FAECT’s successful 1937 campaign to reinstate Robert Durand to the Federal Power Commission (he was dismissed for distributing federation literature during the lunch hour), Durand himself wrote to the *Bulletin* to thank the Women’s Auxiliary for “picketing, distributing leaflets, and its welcome financial assistance.” [32] Reading this, we are left to wonder what, if any, organizing work was done by the technical men.

FAECT’s construction of the technical worker widened their base, albeit unevenly. In retrospect, their shortcomings are obvious, but addressing systemic professional exclusion remains difficult. Our present struggle happens on two fronts: first against the persistent trends of racialized, gendered, and ableist exclusion faced by practitioners across the building industry, and second against management attempts to blunt advocacy for structural reforms by paying lip service to the issue or by enacting feeble diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The transformation we need should be formulated by, and address the needs of, rank-and-file practitioners both in and outside the building industry.

Here, the ABI Collective finds inspiration in the legacy of feminist and anti-racist advocacy in the technical professions by the member group SftP. They addressed these topics in the labs and schools where they worked. And

[28] Milton Fischer, “N.T.A. Faces Racial Problems,” *Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians* 4, no. 7 (October 1937): 18.

[29] “N.T.A. Faces Racial Problems: Negro Technicians Favor Program,” *Technical America* 5, no. 2 (February 1938).

[30] Ro Berne, “Women to Hold Special Convention Session,” *Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians* 4 (June 1937): 11.

[31] “Auxiliary News,” *Technical America* 5, no. 1 (January 1938): 16.

[32] “In the Mail,” June 1937, 2.

they went further, by questioning the role of the scientific knowledge their labor created. Against an ascendant biological essentialism in science and pervasive racism and misogyny in universities and workplaces, they advanced the idea that a more equitable and critical profession producing scientific knowledge could challenge both biased science and work against these biases in society at large. [33] A 1982 cover of their periodical showed a woodcut of women working in the sciences and providing medical care to other women, with the title “Women Challenging Science Challenging Women.” [34]

As SftP’s writing illustrates, the social composition of technical workers has social consequences. The assumptions made by technical workers are informed by their experiences and tend to multiply across our shared environment. They are reproduced in algorithms, stormwater infrastructure, environmental management, and architectural design. In this way, we see the political consequences of technical work. Decades before SftP, FAECT set the precedent that embracing these political consequences could be the work of organized labor.

“The role of the technician in society” [35]

FAECT connected their social and political ambitions to their daily labor as technical workers, developing a critical perspective on the role of technical work in society. They exposed the political bias in technical work by commenting on New Deal projects, challenging the notion that technical work could be a neutral discipline. However, they also recognized that technical work alone did not possess an inherent power to transform the world. They understood that a broader political program was necessary to fully realize the social potential of technical work.

In the 1930s, many “technical men” were on the “WPA rolls,” causing national policy to become an issue of both personal and social interest to the federation. The Bulletin followed national policy rigorously, connecting their livelihoods to its social and economic impacts. With a politically active membership, FAECT took issue with the way the programs were administered and the ends to which they were designed.

Rather than focusing solely on “wallet issues”—like better pay and overtime benefits—FAECT organized to refigure the work of the WPA. After their first convention, FAECT proposed that local chapters draw up their own ideas for WPA programs, “present [these projects] to proper authorities,” and “[exert] pressure to bring them to fruition.” [36] The federation envisioned their savvy technicians as more capable than elected officials and petty managers of determining the content and purpose of technical work. FAECT built labor density in federal programs and then leveraged it to influence their outcomes. Along the way, FAECT won a string of victories for workers within WPA programs: increased hours, prevailing wages, and the removal of pay tiers. [37]

A major point of FAECT advocacy and influence on New Deal policy was the construction of public housing. The federation advocated for the construction of mass housing, and was critical of the narrow scope of New Deal housing programs, whose “main object was to rehabilitate a large portion of the 21 billion dollar home mortgage market structure.” [38] FAECT members—with contributions from housing advocates like Lewis Mumford, Henry Wright, and

[33] See further: Alyssa Botelho, “Race and Gender,” in *Science for the People: Documents from America’s Movement of Radical Scientists*, ed. Sigrid Schmalzer, Daniel S. Chard, and Alyssa Botelho (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 111–133.

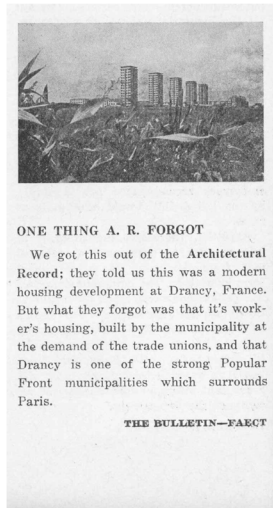
[34] Available in the Science for the People online archive at [link](#).

[35] Simon Breines, “Designers of Shelter in America: A New Society Makes Its Bow,” *Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians* 3, no. 11 (November 1936): 4–5.

[36] “A Program for Technical Men: Adopted at the First National Convention,” *Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians* 2, no. 2 (March 1935): 12–13.

[37] In 1938, *Technical America* ran a regular monthly column on page 12 titled “Federation Activities,” documenting the wins and struggles in local chapters. See “Federation Activities,” *Technical America*, February 1938, 12; “Federation Activities,” *Technical America*, March 1938, 12; “Federation Activities,” *Technical America*, April 1938, 12; and so on. In 1937, the Bulletin printed a regular column titled “News from the Chapters.” See “News from the Chapters,” *FAECT Bulletin*, March 1937, 10. Prior to that only major wins were posted; for an example, see Bulletin

Catherine Bauer—assembled an archive of research and design precedents for mass housing. [39] The federal government took notice. In 1935, the newly formed Public Works Administration made a copy of the entire library for internal use; later that year, the library was lent to the Resettlement Administration, whose scores of greenbelt communities, many of which were planned on the basis of cooperative ownership, bear the imprint of FAECT's housing program. [40]



Simultaneous with their advocacy for progressive housing policy, federation members considered how their work could contribute to resilience against disasters. In 1936, as the water from a spate of devastating floods across thirteen states was still receding, FAECT chapters began organizing Flood Prevention Committees under the premise that industry and federal responses to the floods were lacking. FAECT believed the floods “could have been prevented with certainty had engineers been permitted to apply their science” and that a coordinated flood control program “means increased employment of our membership.” [41] FAECT's position as workers was different from that of management—after the 1936 floods, the industry mouthpiece *Engineering News-Record* (ENR) merely stated that “there will always be floods.” FAECT balked at this response, characterizing ENR as representative of “vested interest[s] in industrial construction” who had much to gain from costly recovery efforts. [42]

The *Bulletin* acknowledged that technical work was no panacea. To FAECT, the dam building of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) represented the “consummation of technical skill,” but they criticized the program for creating a “new type of rural refugee” because of how the dams flooded upstream forests and farmsteads. “Social features indeed,” the *Bulletin* says of the TVA, “but for whom?” Again, the solution was to grant technical workers power to not just execute but also plan projects. Instead of a “pet project of the Roosevelt administration,” the federation asserted that the program could be redesigned “for operation and not for publicity” and reoriented to protect vulnerable rural

of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians, “NY Chapter Activity Wins Jobs and Members,” November 1935, 6.

[38] Simon Brienens, “New Deal Housing—Successful Failure,” *Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians*, May 1935, 5–6, 10.

[39] The *Bulletin* mentions Lewis Mumford, Catherine Bauer, Clarence Stein, Albert Mayer, and Robert Kohn, among others. See “Henry Wright Library—A Living Memorial,” *Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians*, June 1937, 6.

[40] Joseph L. Arnold, “Building a Democratic and Cooperative Community,” in *The New Deal in the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935–1954* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1971).

The *Bulletin* engaged in lively antagonism with other trade publications, including *Architectural Record*, *Engineering News-Record*, and *Pencil Points*. Pictured here: “One thing A.R. [i.e. *Architectural Record*] Forgot,” October 1936.

[41] “Pittsburgh Fights for Flood Control,” *Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians* 3, no. 6 (June 1936): 4.

[42] Jeremy Boyle, “We See by the Papers—,” *Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians* 3, no. 7 (July 1936): 12.

communities of “tenants and sharecroppers” who, not owning land, were not compensated by the TVA for their loss of livelihood. [43]

Remarkably, the vision of a national flood-control plan by technical workers does not privilege the unique contribution of technical work: “the problem of flood control is vast, but not because it presents technical difficulties.” [44] There is an apparent tension between these statements—FAECT is simultaneously organizing technical workers to lead national-scale planning while acknowledging that the major difficulties in this effort are political, not technical, in nature. Between the lines, though, their position is clear: the organization of technical workers is a component part of a wider political program, to bring work on socially meaningful projects under the control of workers, not the bosses or the financiers.

Though socially and politically progressive, FAECT never questioned the core tenets of industrial growth and economic progress. Nonetheless, FAECT’s engagement with the political nature of technical work informs the ABI Collective’s engagement with the present conditions. Moreover, the specific topics with which FAECT engaged, like disaster prevention and housing, are acutely relevant to today’s housing-scarce cities bracing against the impacts of climate change. Like FAECT, we see that these conditions cannot be addressed by business interests within the building industry—they require radical rank-and-file participation to determine which projects should (and should not) get built.

The Architecture Lobby’s Green New Deal Working Group, a member organization of the ABI Collective, articulated how worker-led organizing catalyzes sector-wide organizing, in part because, as the group notes, unions are exempt from the antitrust regulations that prevent collaboration between architecture firms on issues of climate, housing, and an equitable built environment. And as architects are only one part of a larger building sector, the group acknowledges that a wider solidarity is necessary—with the building trades, with Indigenous land stewards, and with struggles everywhere to repair “a long history of environmental racism.” [45]

Now as then, workers are organizing for more control over the projects they work on. We organize for the ability to refuse work that militarizes communities, immiserates our cities, or impoverishes the land, while we envision a building industry where our effort and expertise are directed toward building a just future. While workplace organizing to achieve these ends is meaningful, it remains only one part of a larger strategy: building power as technical workers will allow us to challenge the current mode of building that sacrifices our collective future for the financial gains of a select few.

Can we afford to speak out?

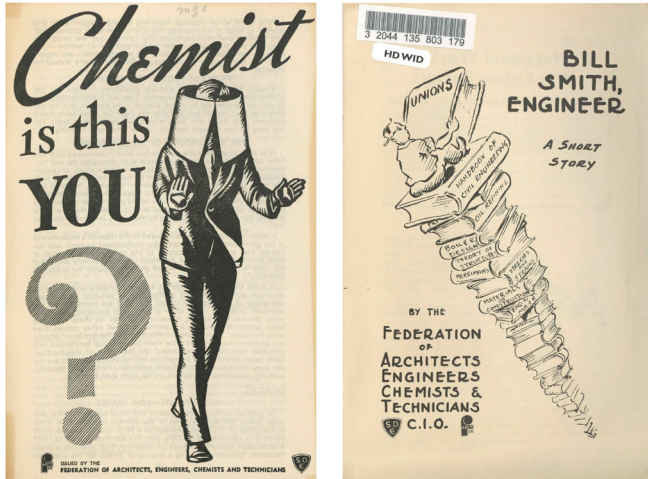
The absence of an organization like FAECT today is sorely felt. Since the federation’s dissolution, there has been no counterbalance to each profession’s inclination to hold itself apart from the others. Architectural design magazines—the “important” ones, at least—are filled with photographs of buildings where the occupants, the contractors, and the building trades workers are all outside the frame. The architecture itself, apparently, seems to be all that matters. Simultaneously, engineering journals celebrate the unique

[43] A. J. Krell, “Water Control: A National Plan to Control Floods and Soil Erosion,” *Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians* 3, no. 4 (April 1936): 4.

[44] Krell, “Water Control,” 4.

[45] “Organizing for a Just Transition,” Architecture Lobby Green New Deal Working Group, June 2023.

contribution of engineers, which, though poorly understood by nonengineers, is presented as what really gets the world built safely, on time, and on budget. Divisions between technical workers have become more deeply entrenched. Each group believes itself to be the principal part of the building process.



Two pamphlets published by FAECT demonstrate different tactics used to appeal to potential members. “Bill Smith, Engineer” is an illustrated short story of a downtrodden worker who joins FAECT and wins back pay for him and his coworkers. “Chemist, Is This You?” meticulously describes the poor working conditions and low wages faced by chemists and academics, while the cover humorously illustrates a worker blinded by his own white collar.

As we have become accustomed to these divisions, it may seem novel that the *Bulletin* is filled with articles and letters from a cross-section of technical professions—architects, engineers, chemists, telegraphers, public sector, private sector, academics, the employed and unemployed. Indeed, the tension between “industrial unionism” and discipline-specific “craft unionism” has shaped much of twentieth-century labor politics. But the sense of a common project between technical workers, the sense of a profession capable of existing beyond the strictures of capitalist production, the solidarity with laborers and construction workers—what accounts for their centrality to FAECT, and their near absence today?

In the 1930s, all labor groups ran the risk of accusation—rightly or wrongly—of being affiliated with the Communist Party. In the November 1934 issue of the *Bulletin*, a letter from the secretary of the Youngstown, Pennsylvania, chapter notified the editors that the *Bulletin* was publishing content that some had “gone so far as to label [...] a RED article,” leading to a discussion regarding whether or not members wished to affiliate with the federation. The letter was published under the header “Can the *Bulletin* Afford to Speak Out?” FAECT National Secretary Jules Korchien did not answer the question, but implied that the *Bulletin* must speak out in defense of others “as other organizations of workers or white collar groups are often affected by the same conditions that affect ourselves.” [46] In exercising this solidarity, the vision of FAECT and its *Bulletin* was always twofold: on the one hand, the wallet issues that had historically motivated a large portion of the labor movement and directly affected the profession, especially during the 1930s—low wages, job insecurity, and unemployment—and on the other hand, wider social issues—critical reflections on New Deal programs, the housing question, and discussions of social justice, racial discrimination, and poverty. Alongside organizing reports and unionization updates, the group also published articles and memorialized federation members who died fighting for the republican

[46] Elroy Webber et al., eds., “Can the *Bulletin* Afford to Speak Out?” *Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians* 1, no. 5 (November 1934): 6–7.

cause in the Spanish Civil War. [47]

FAECT, like many other labor organizations, had indeed been led by members of the Communist Party— some openly, others surreptitiously. Just as their party affiliation buoyed their efforts in the 1930s and early 1940s, it gutted their power after World War II as its leaders were red-baited by the Taft-Hartley Act, forced to testify in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee, and often blacklisted from practice. Famously, Julius Rosenberg and Robert Oppenheimer were accused of Party affiliation by the government after the end of the war due to their membership in FAECT. By the close of the 1960s, this had come full circle and the FAECT's perspective went missing from professional discourse. Publications like *Progressive Architecture* (previously *Pencil Points*, a publication for employer architects and the *Bulletin's* frequent sparring partner) and *Engineering News-Record* became the loudest voices in the profession.

Were the *Bulletin* still published in 1974, we imagine it printing a spirited response to *Progressive Architecture's* pandering coverage of the upstart New York Five, the new “radical” modernists. And today, we can guess at its critique of LEED-certified luxury condominium towers. Staying with that speculative response, it is possible to see an alternate trajectory of architectural theory and practice in the second half of the twentieth century, one wherein the technical professions recognized their participation in racial capitalism and class exploitation.

But we did not read the *Bulletin* to inhabit an imagined past; we read it to better organize our present. The housing crisis, the climate catastrophe, the insecurity of our employment, the use of our skills to reinforce a divided and exclusionary world—these are the factors that motivated the formation of the ABI Collective, which seeks to test the viability of building industry practitioners as a broad base from which to transform the present moment.

While individual practitioners may feel powerless, believing that refusing to work on compromised projects is insignificant, activists organizing around racial and ecological justice see potential. The organizers of Stop Cop City—an occupation to prevent the construction of a police training facility in the greenbelt outside Atlanta—tell us that “construction companies seem easier to sway than city government.” And they do sway them. They break construction contracts, chanting and playing music at the homes of project managers. If those of us in the building sector want to stand with forest defenders, we must be organized enough to withhold our labor—which doesn't come without risks. As noted above, FAECT's success in linking workplace organizing to a broader social project ultimately made them targets for the House Un-American Activities Committee.

About thirty years after the peak of FAECT's influence and twenty-two years after its dissolution, Whitney Young of the Urban League took the stage at the 1968 American Institute of Architects (AIA) convention. “You are not members of a profession distinguished by your social and civil contribution to the cause of civil rights,” the civil rights leader said to the assembled architects. “You are most distinguished by your thunderous silence and complete irrelevance.” [48] This statement, true of the AIA in 1968, would not have applied to FAECT. In the *Bulletin*, social concerns beyond the profession were part and parcel of workplace organizing. In our present time, building industry workers

[47] “Memorial for a FAECT Member,” *Bulletin of the Federation of Architects, Engineers, Chemists, and Technicians* February 1938, 13.

[48] Whitney Young, “Full Remarks of Whitney M. Young Jr.,” transcript of keynote address delivered at the 1968 AIA Annual Convention, Portland, Oregon, June 1968, [link](#).

are faced with the same set of questions. Can we afford to speak out? Or as the history of the Bulletin begs us to ask, can we afford not to?

THE ALTERNATIVE BUILDING INDUSTRY (ABI) COLLECTIVE IS A GROUP OF RANK-AND-FILE WORKERS ORGANIZING WITHIN THE BUILDING SECTOR IN SUPPORT OF A JUST TRANSITION. ABI COLLECTIVE IS MOTIVATED BY THE FACT THAT EVERYONE IN THE BUILDING SECTOR CAN CONTRIBUTE TO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR ALL, BUT THIS WORK WILL NOT BE POSSIBLE WITHOUT RESHAPING THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE SECTOR AS A WHOLE. WE ARE BUILDING A POLITICAL CONSTITUENCY OF WORKERS TO REFUSE FALSE SOLUTIONS AND CONTINUED INJUSTICE, WHILE ORGANIZING TOGETHER FOR AN ECOLOGICAL PRACTICE OF BUILDING AS PART OF A JUST WORLD.

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