



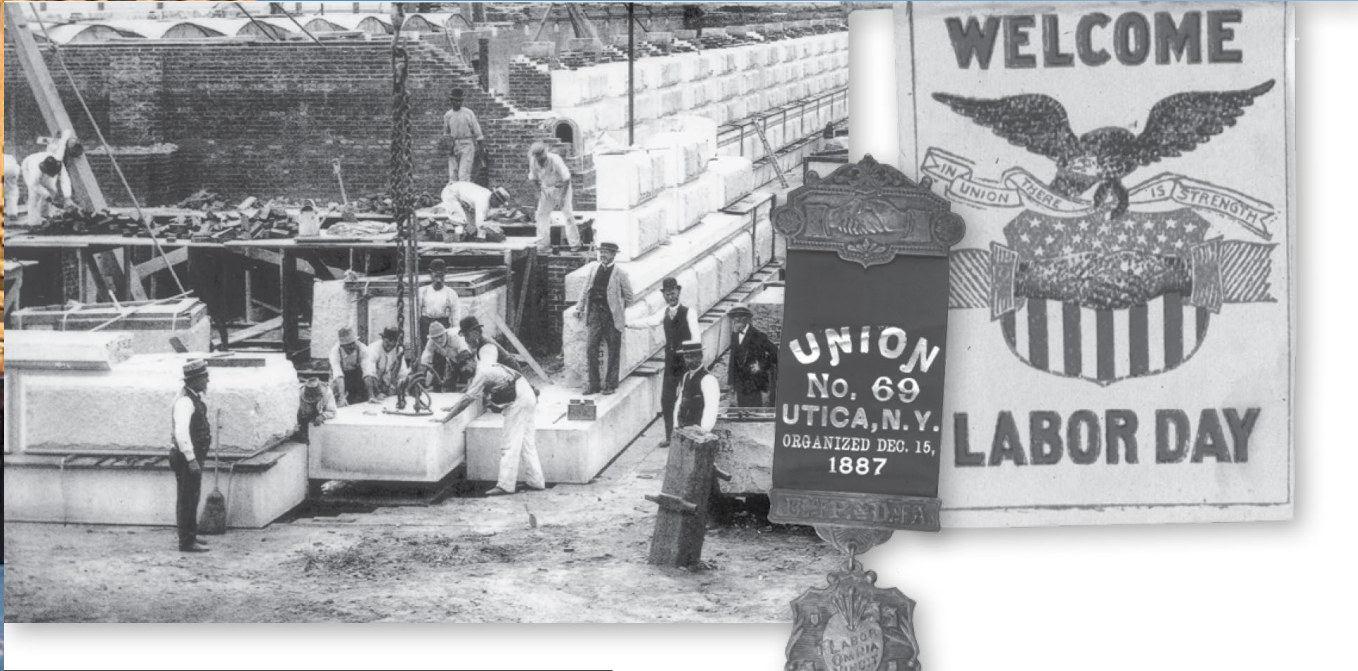
TradesFutures

MC3 Unit 6

Heritage of the American Worker

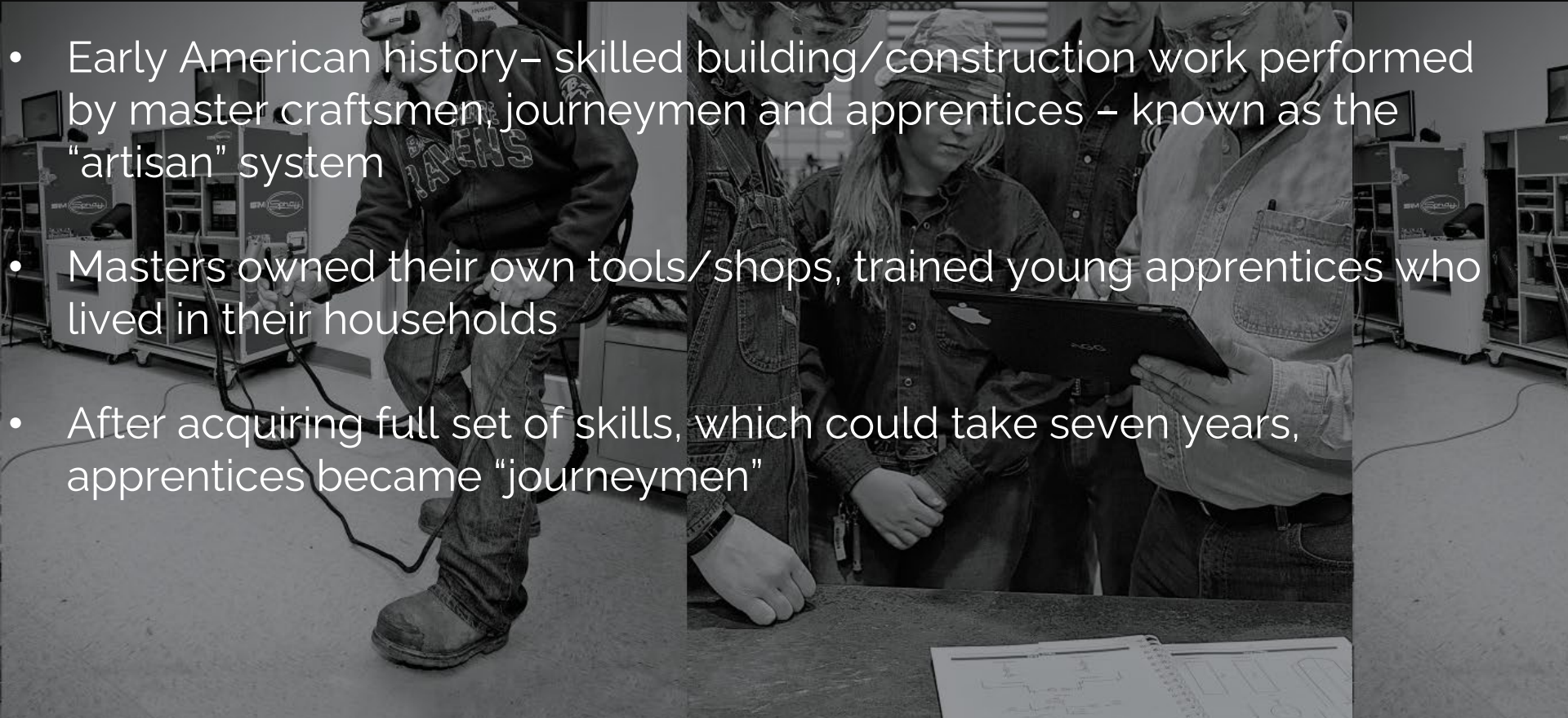
May 2023

Section 1: From Artisans to Wage Earners to Local and National Unions



The Artisan System

- Early American history– skilled building/construction work performed by master craftsmen, journeymen and apprentices – known as the “artisan” system
- Masters owned their own tools/shops, trained young apprentices who lived in their households
- After acquiring full set of skills, which could take seven years, apprentices became “journeymen”

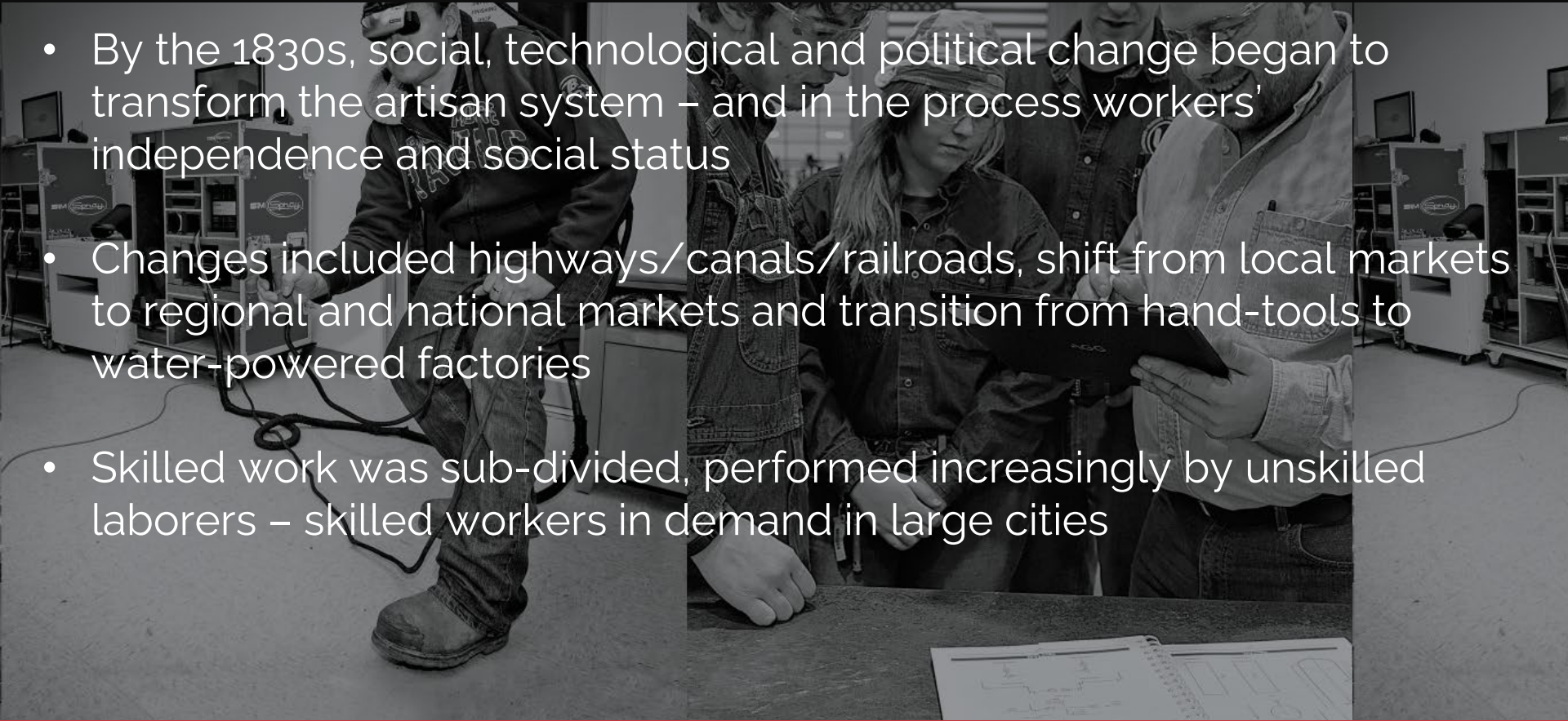


Apprenticeship and the Guild System

- **Apprenticeship** first developed in later Middle Ages in Europe – supervised by **craft Guilds**/local gov't
- Guilds were organized groups of **master craftsmen** – who defined terms of apprentice's indenture
- Guilds kept wages high by limiting number of apprentices – and also enforced quality standards

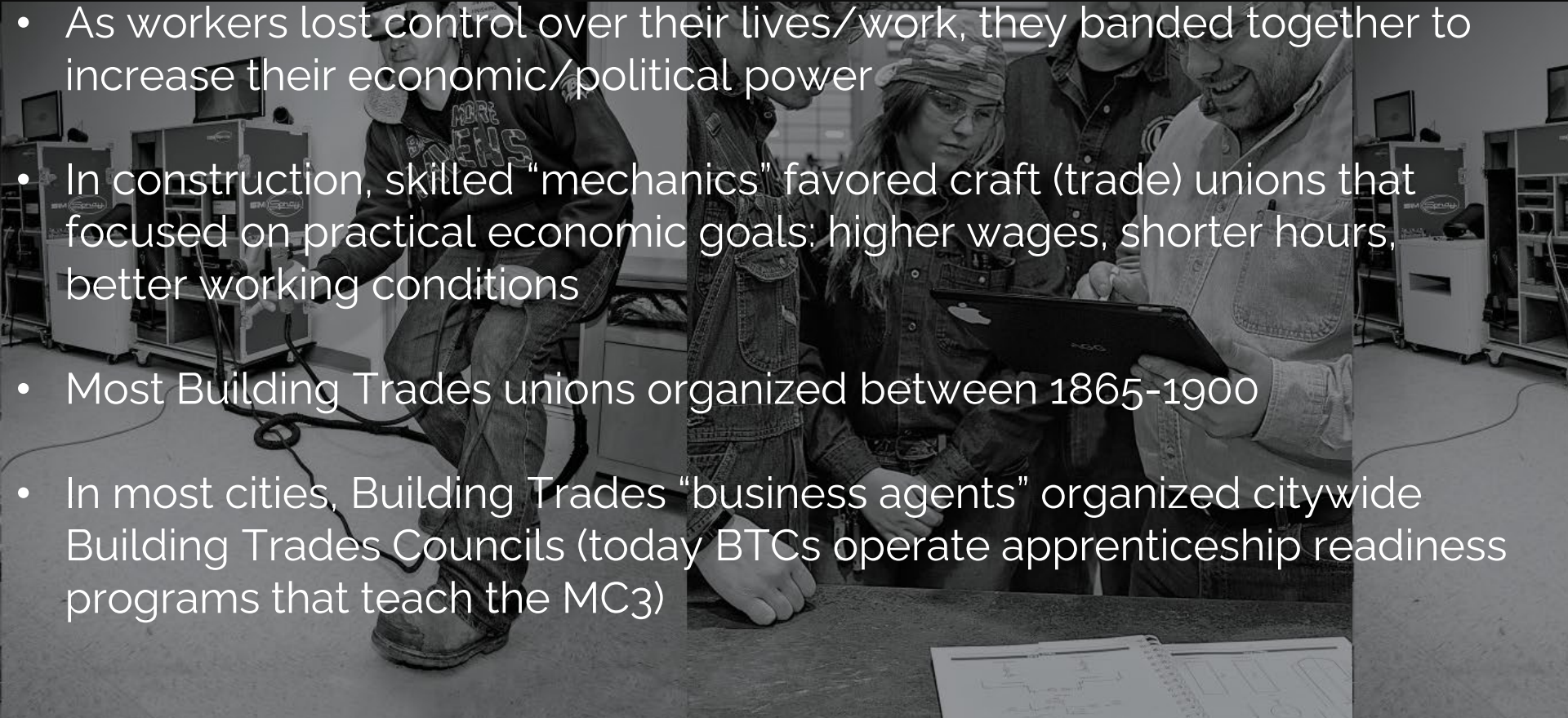
Changes to the Artisan System

- By the 1830s, social, technological and political change began to transform the artisan system – and in the process workers' independence and social status
- Changes included highways/canals/railroads, shift from local markets to regional and national markets and transition from hand-tools to water-powered factories
- Skilled work was sub-divided, performed increasingly by unskilled laborers – skilled workers in demand in large cities



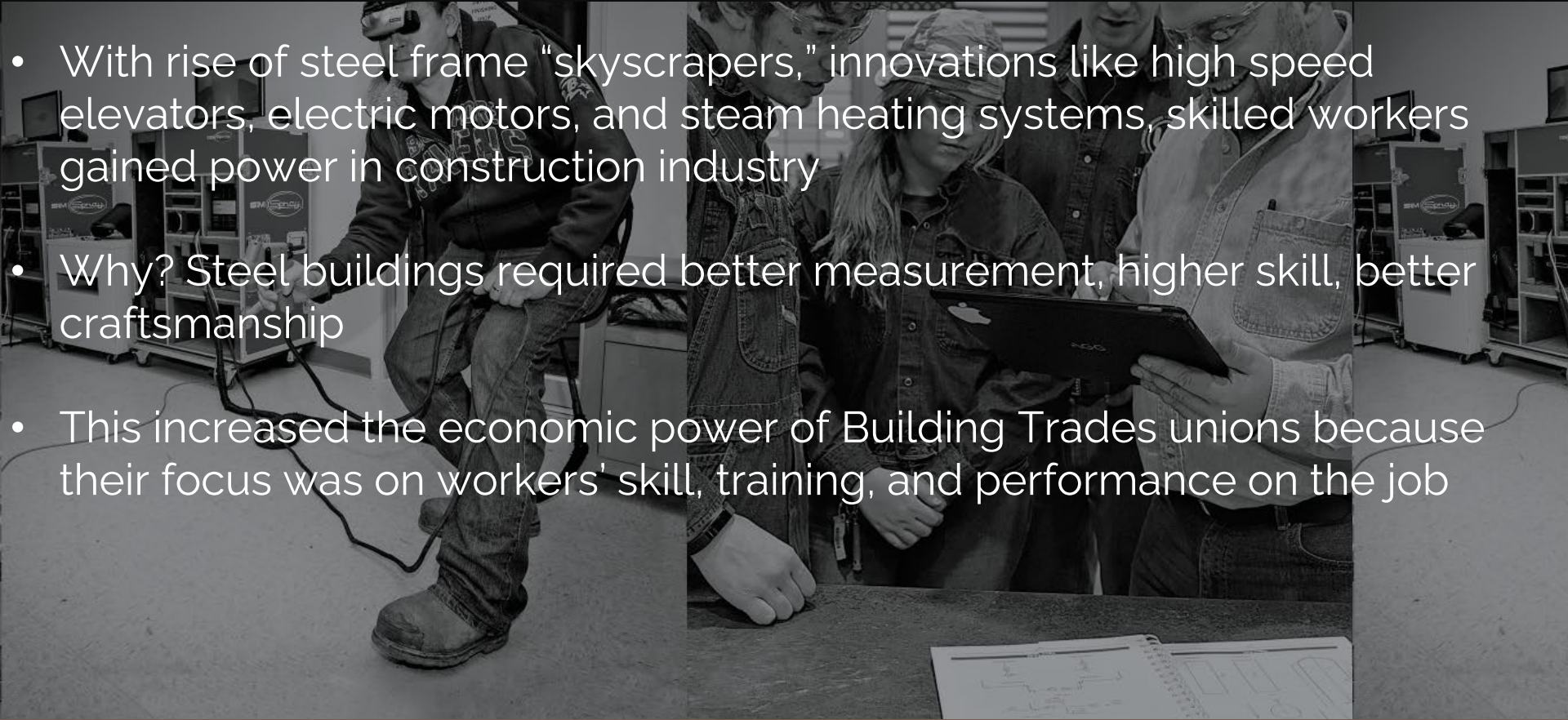
The Workers' Response? Workers' Organizations

- As workers lost control over their lives/work, they banded together to increase their economic/political power
- In construction, skilled “mechanics” favored craft (trade) unions that focused on practical economic goals: higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions
- Most Building Trades unions organized between 1865-1900
- In most cities, Building Trades “business agents” organized citywide Building Trades Councils (today BTCs operate apprenticeship readiness programs that teach the MC3)

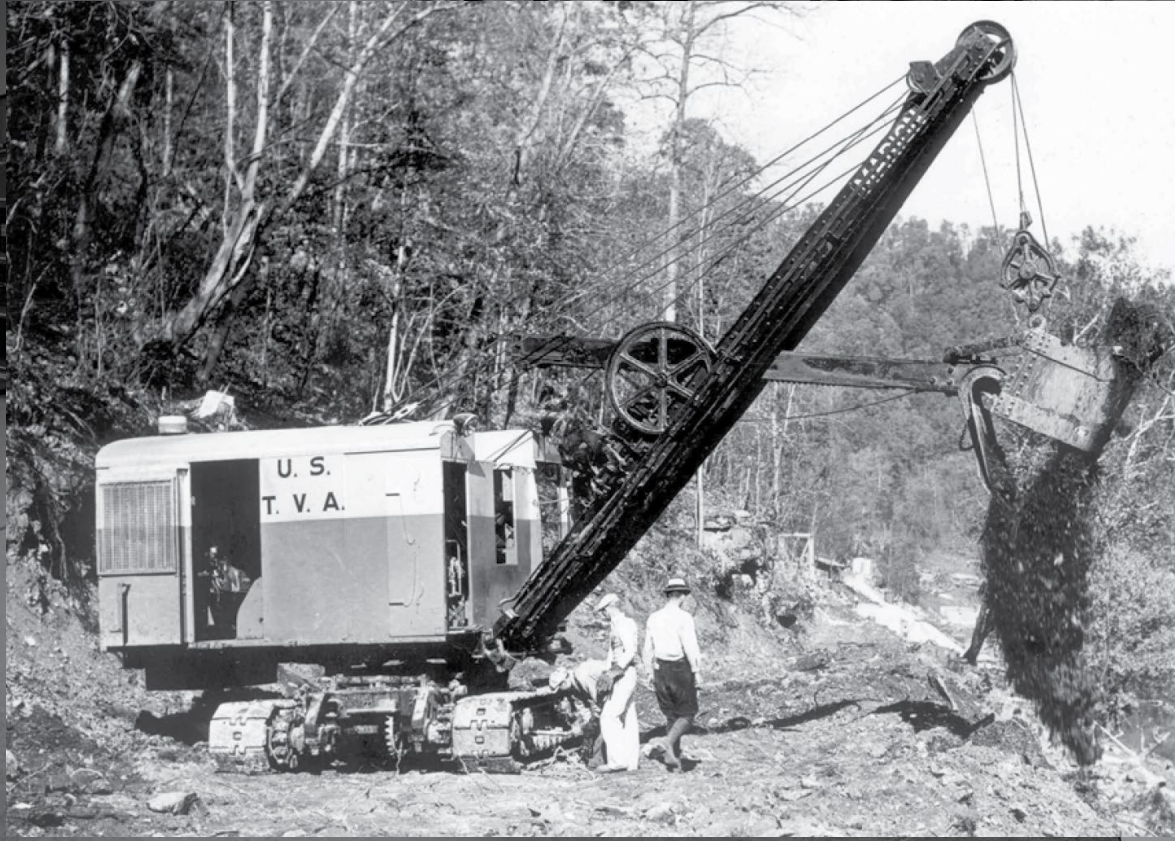


Building Structures, Building Power (Based on Skills)

- With rise of steel frame “skyscrapers,” innovations like high speed elevators, electric motors, and steam heating systems, skilled workers gained power in construction industry
- Why? Steel buildings required better measurement, higher skill, better craftsmanship
- This increased the economic power of Building Trades unions because their focus was on workers' skill, training, and performance on the job

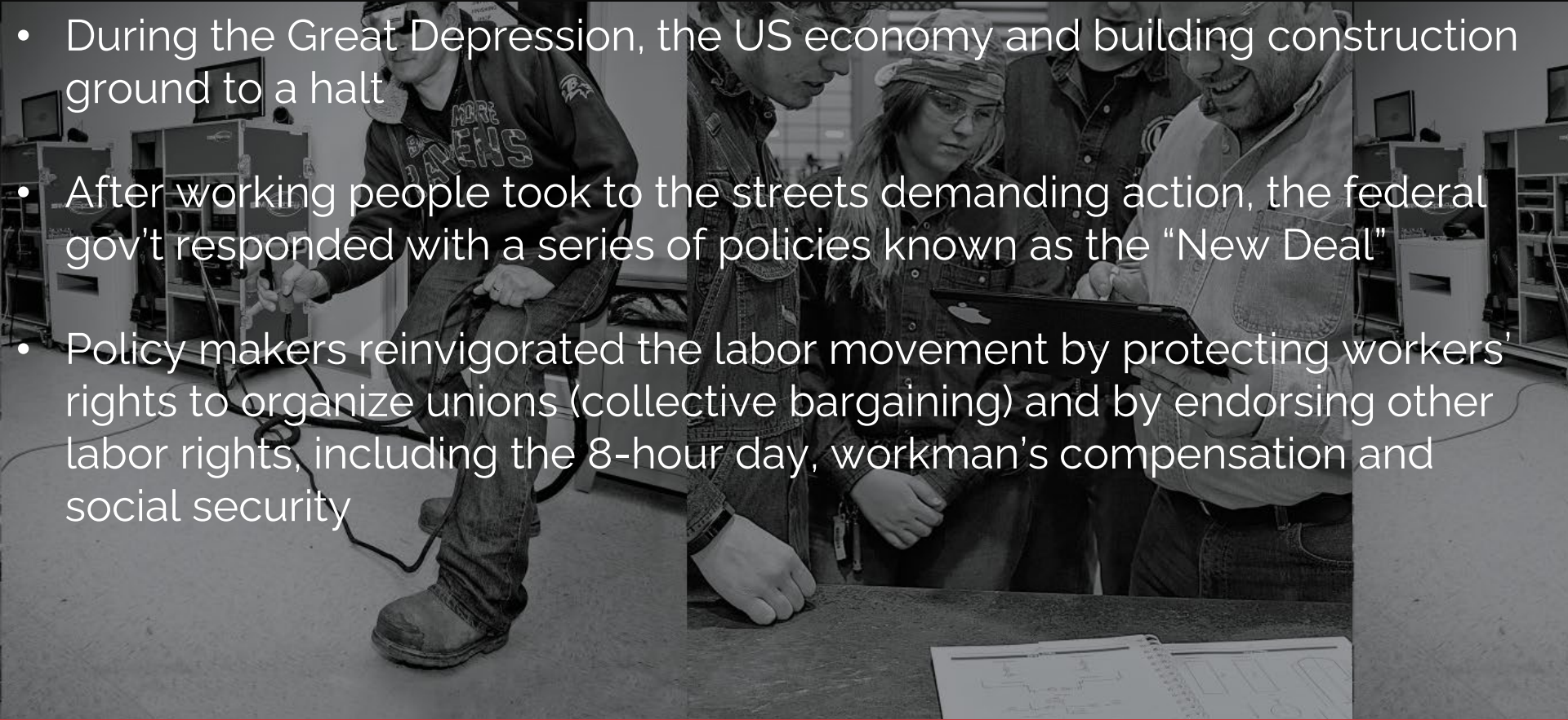


Section 2: Government Matters



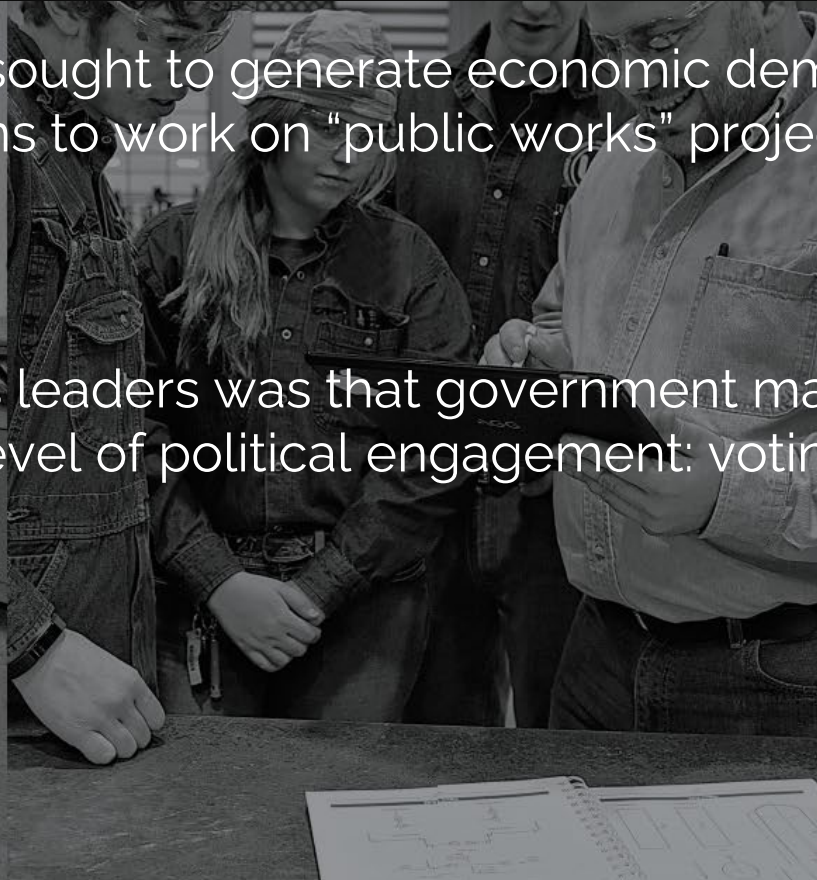
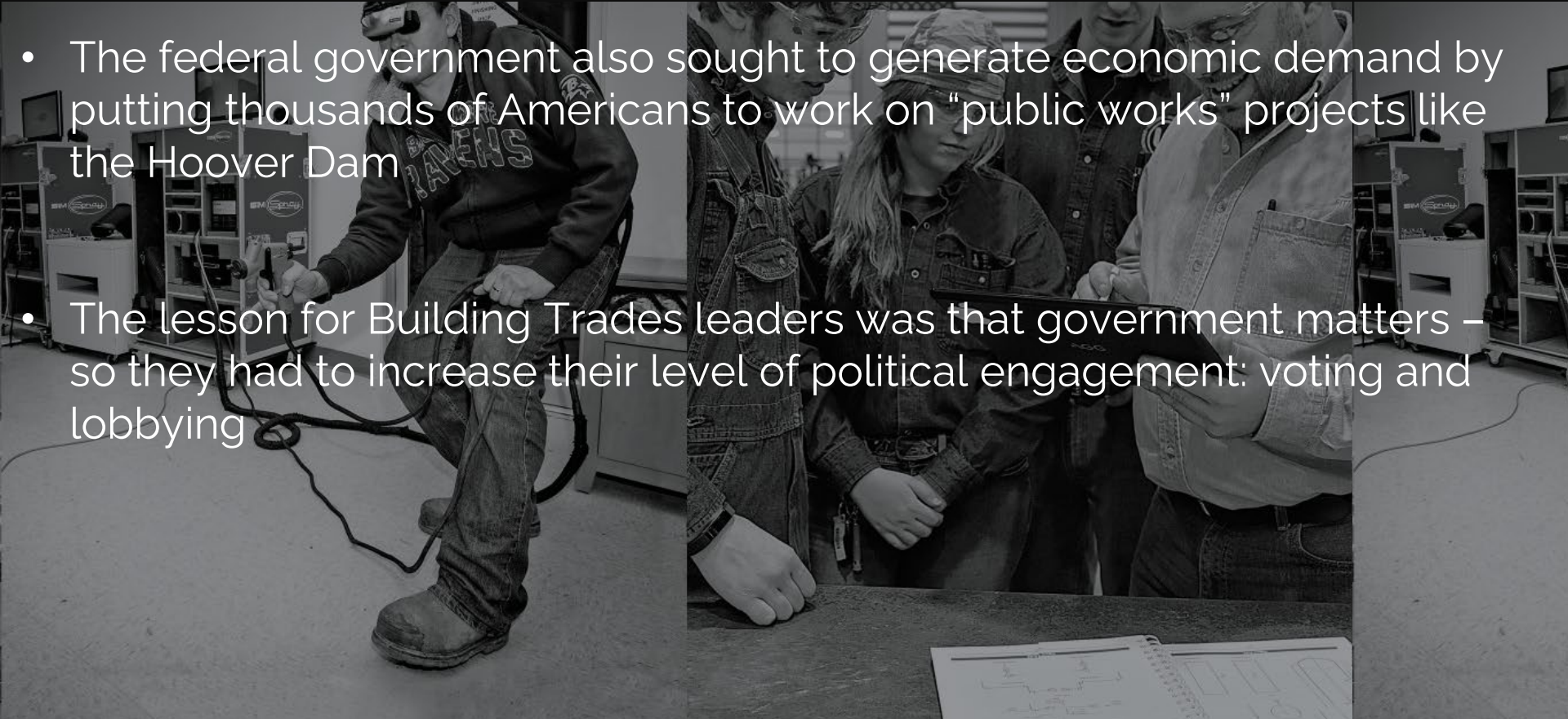
Working Americans Take to the Streets

- During the Great Depression, the US economy and building construction ground to a halt
- After working people took to the streets demanding action, the federal gov't responded with a series of policies known as the "New Deal"
- Policy makers reinvigorated the labor movement by protecting workers' rights to organize unions (collective bargaining) and by endorsing other labor rights, including the 8-hour day, workman's compensation and social security



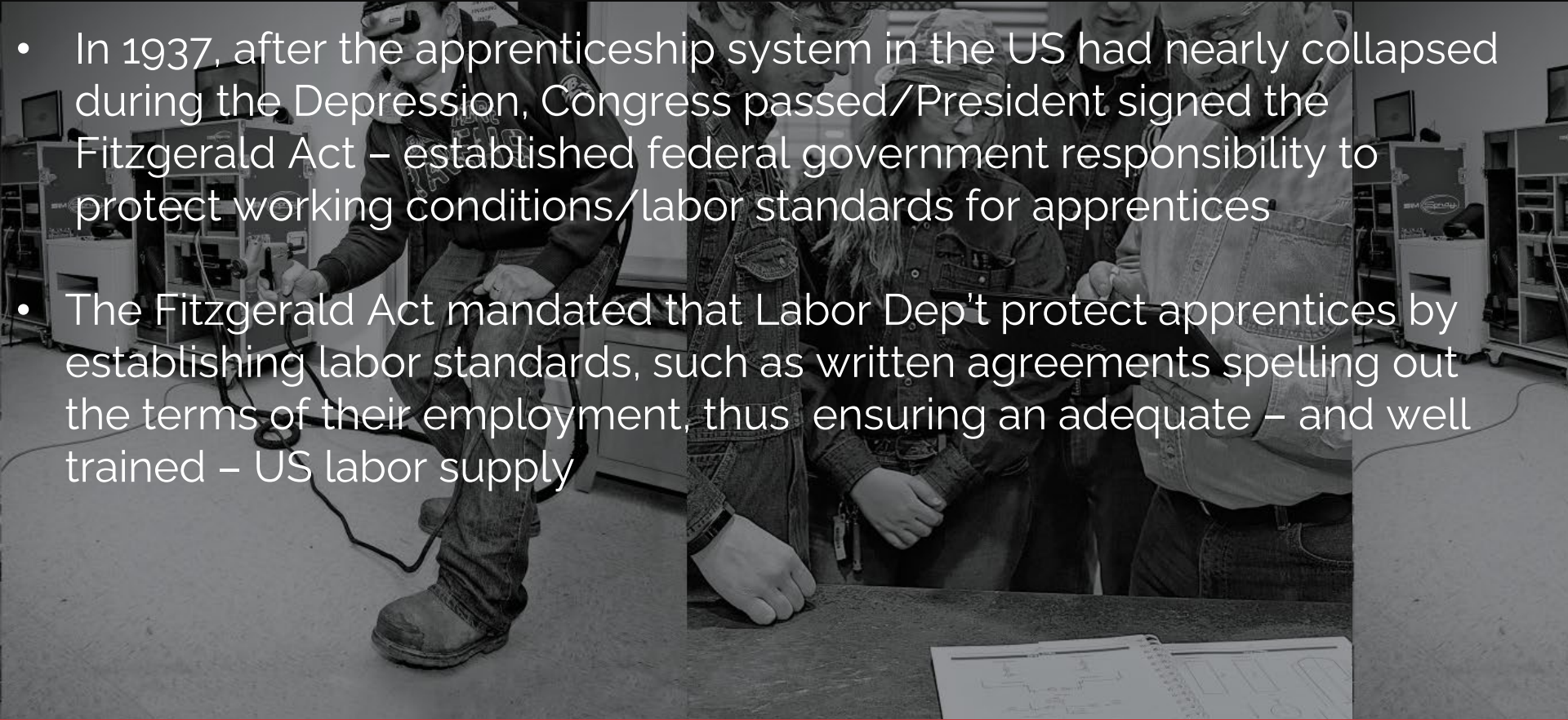
Public Works, Public Jobs

- The federal government also sought to generate economic demand by putting thousands of Americans to work on “public works” projects like the Hoover Dam
- The lesson for Building Trades leaders was that government matters – so they had to increase their level of political engagement: voting and lobbying



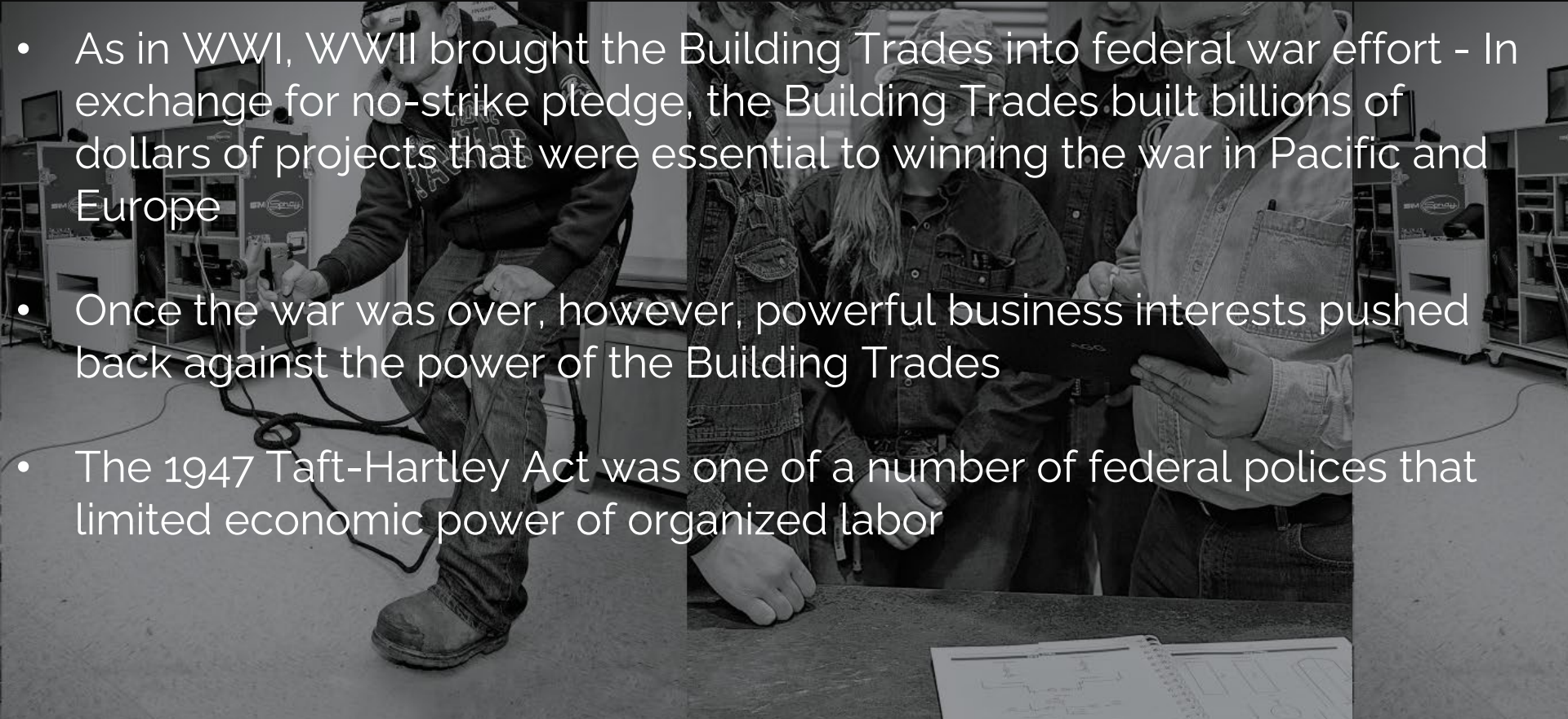
A National Apprenticeship System

- In 1937, after the apprenticeship system in the US had nearly collapsed during the Depression, Congress passed/President signed the Fitzgerald Act – established federal government responsibility to protect working conditions/labor standards for apprentices
- The Fitzgerald Act mandated that Labor Dep't protect apprentices by establishing labor standards, such as written agreements spelling out the terms of their employment, thus ensuring an adequate – and well trained – US labor supply



World War II and the Post-War Reaction

- As in WWI, WWII brought the Building Trades into federal war effort - In exchange for no-strike pledge, the Building Trades built billions of dollars of projects that were essential to winning the war in Pacific and Europe
- Once the war was over, however, powerful business interests pushed back against the power of the Building Trades
- The 1947 Taft-Hartley Act was one of a number of federal policies that limited economic power of organized labor

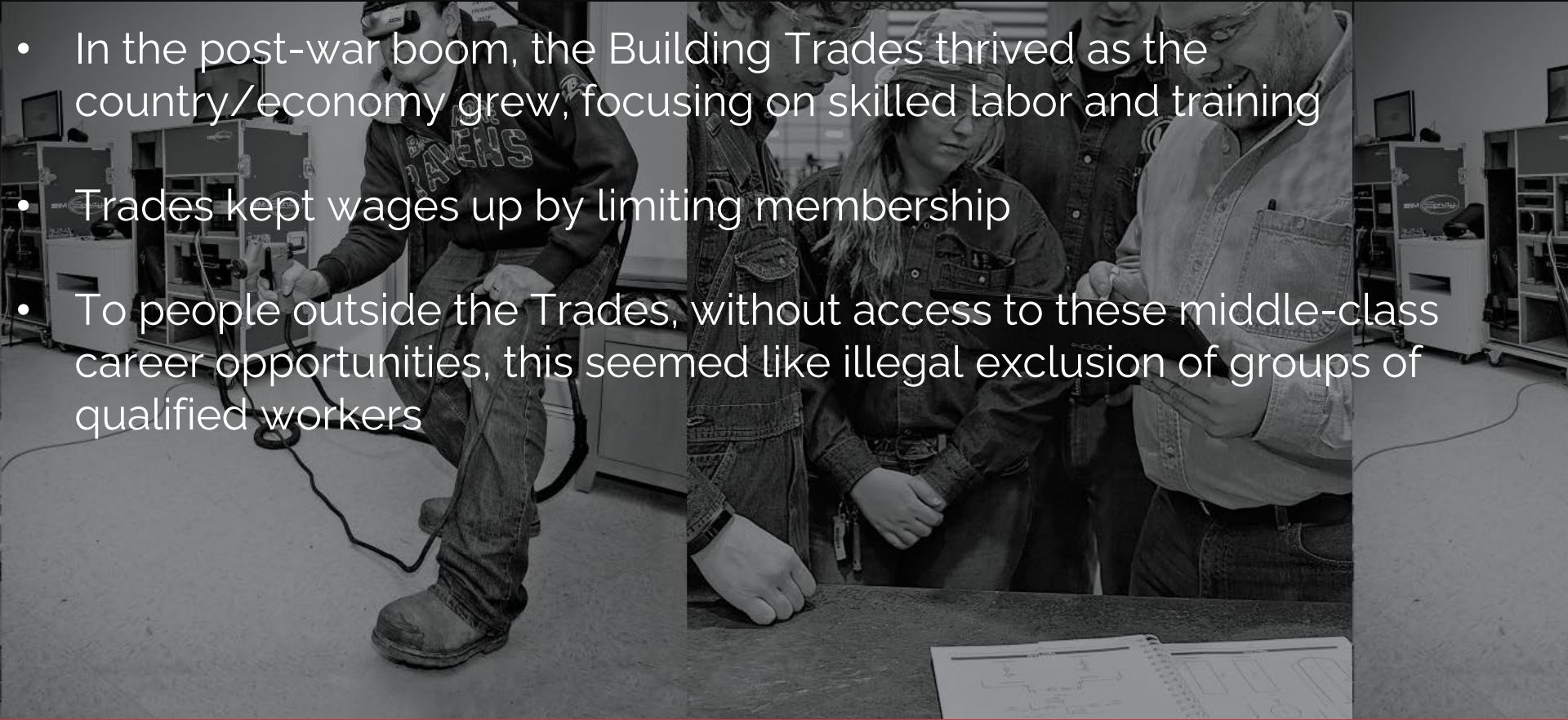


Section 3: The Best of Times, The Worst of Times



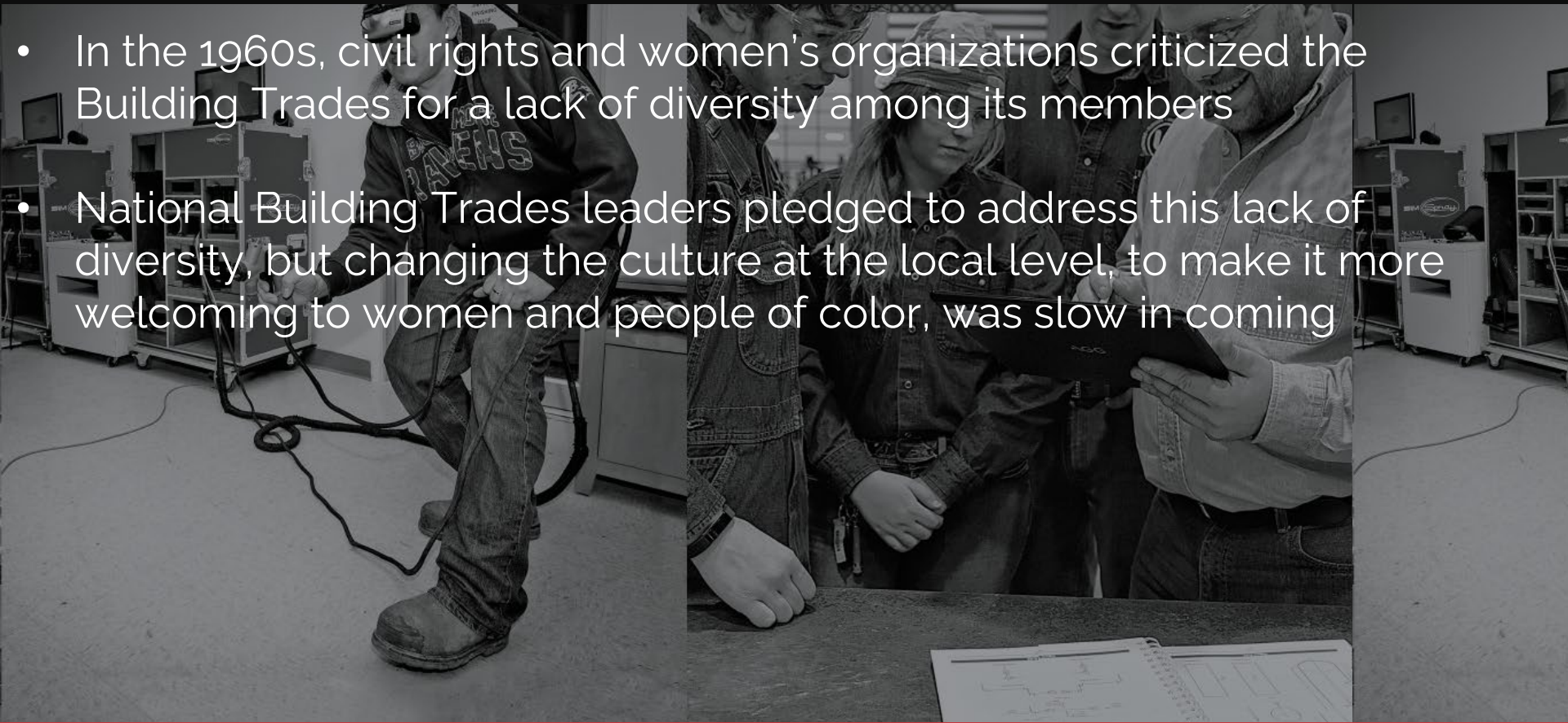
Plentiful Jobs, But Who Gets Them

- In the post-war boom, the Building Trades thrived as the country/economy grew, focusing on skilled labor and training
- Trades kept wages up by limiting membership
- To people outside the Trades, without access to these middle-class career opportunities, this seemed like illegal exclusion of groups of qualified workers



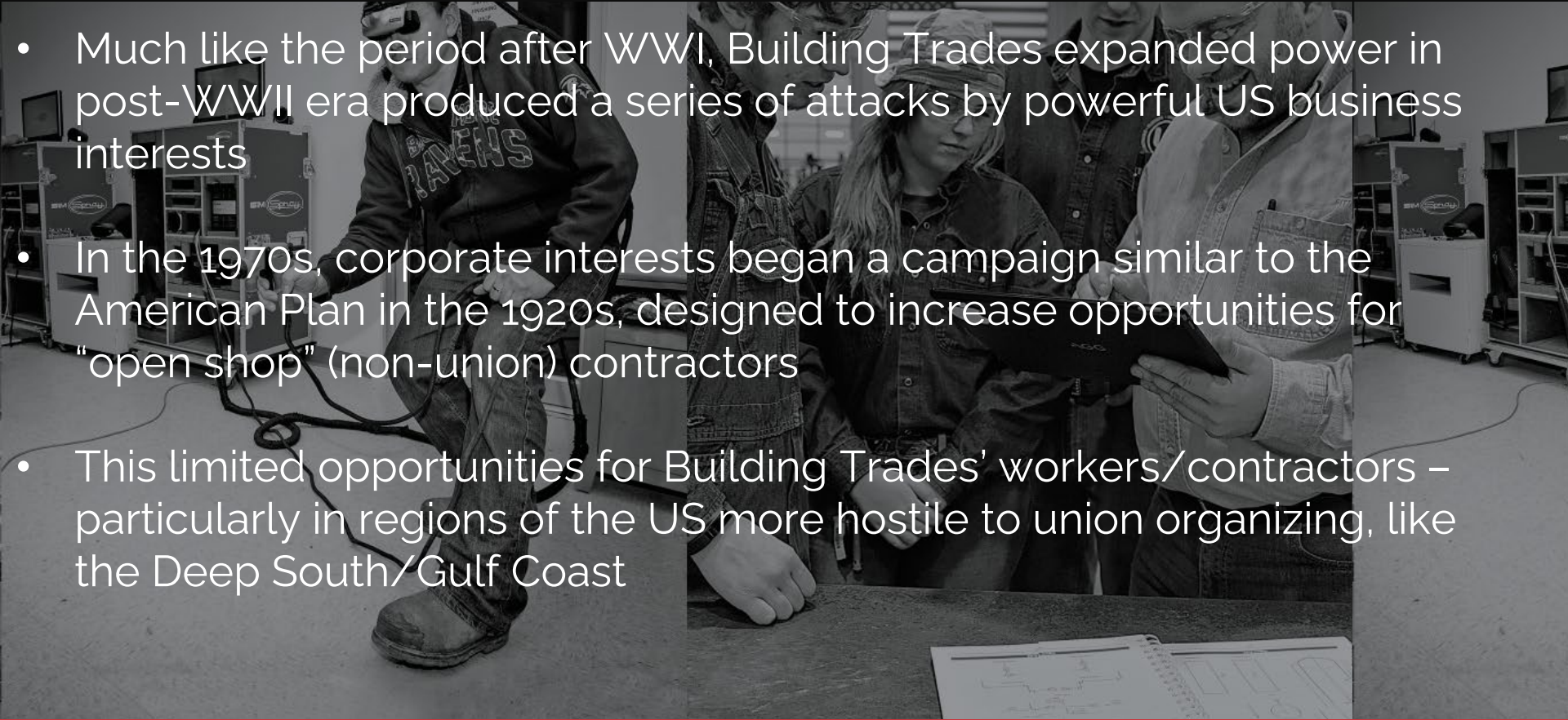
The Trades and Diversity

- In the 1960s, civil rights and women's organizations criticized the Building Trades for a lack of diversity among its members
- National Building Trades leaders pledged to address this lack of diversity, but changing the culture at the local level, to make it more welcoming to women and people of color, was slow in coming



Business Fights Back – Support for the “Open Shop”

- Much like the period after WWI, Building Trades expanded power in post-W/WII era produced a series of attacks by powerful US business interests
- In the 1970s, corporate interests began a campaign similar to the American Plan in the 1920s, designed to increase opportunities for “open shop” (non-union) contractors
- This limited opportunities for Building Trades’ workers/contractors – particularly in regions of the US more hostile to union organizing, like the Deep South/Gulf Coast

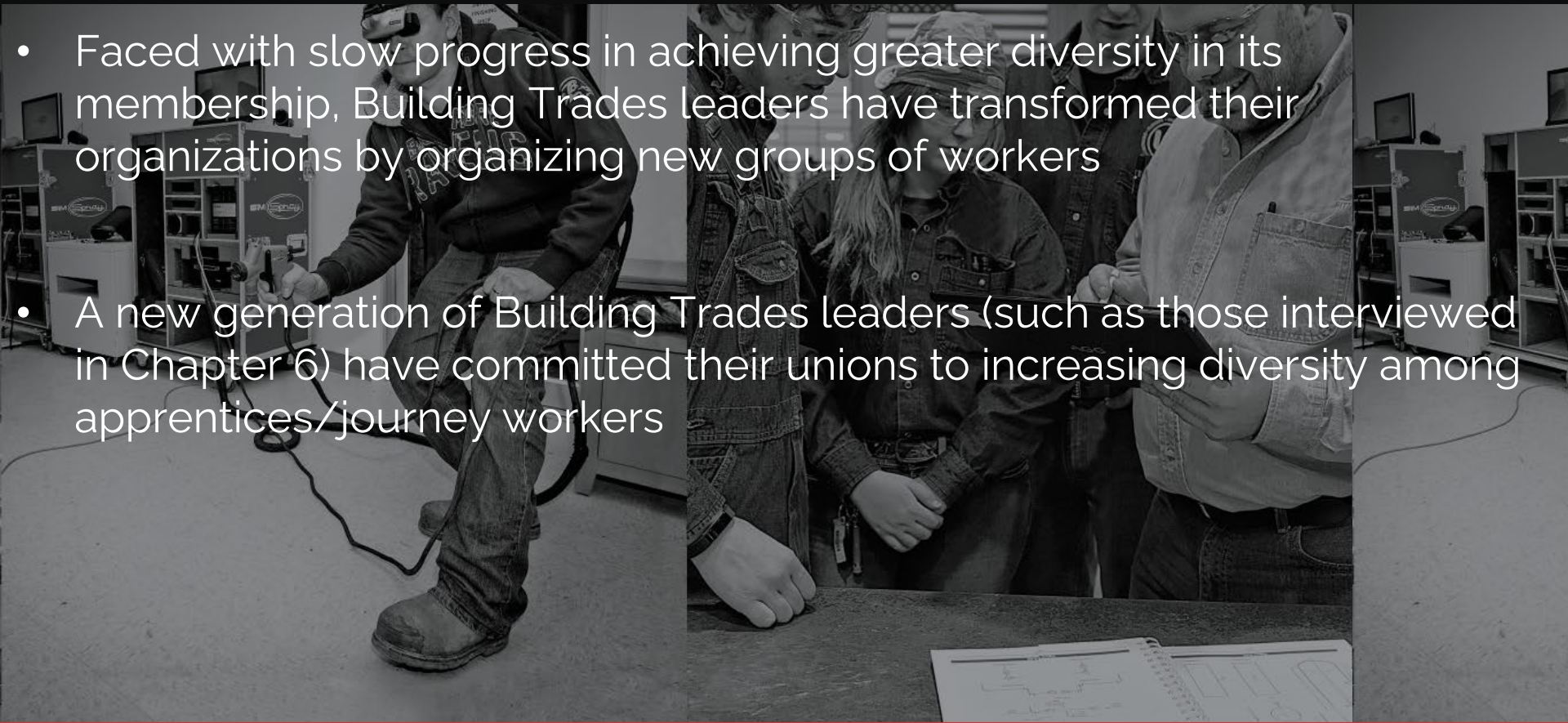


Section 4: Back to the Future



Not Your Grandfather's Building Trades

- Faced with slow progress in achieving greater diversity in its membership, Building Trades leaders have transformed their organizations by organizing new groups of workers
- A new generation of Building Trades leaders (such as those interviewed in Chapter 6) have committed their unions to increasing diversity among apprentices/journey workers



The Building Trades Today – Back to the Future

- Programs such as the Multi-Craft Core Curriculum, Helmets to Hardhats, the NABTU Tradeswomen Committee (and others) illustrates the Building Trades' commitment to recruiting a more diverse group of men and women in the Trades
- As immigrant groups did 100 years ago, new immigrants look to Trades as good source for middle class jobs/family security
- As a result, the Trades' membership today looks more like the American population, even as more work remains to be done





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