





Carpenters' Union Embraces Factory Built Housing to Address Labor Needs in Northern California



“We don’t have a labor shortage, we have an opportunity shortage,” said Jay Bradshaw, Director of Organizing for the Northern California Carpenters Regional Council (NCCRC). Not everyone agrees that the construction industry suffers from a labor shortage. NCCRC represents 37,500 members in 46 northern California counties and feels that labor availability is not the issue. “We have people who want to work, but with housing costs in the area, they are driving three hours to get here because they can’t afford to live in this region,” Bradshaw said.

Labor unions negotiate for higher wages and benefits for workers; higher wages, some argue, lead to higher construction and housing costs; which leads to fewer local available workers; which leads to higher housing costs. The cycle repeats continuously.

NCCRC has decided to address the issue head on – and in a manner not commonly employed by trade unions in the past. The carpenters group felt that it wasn’t in their members’ best interest to try to fight the move towards modular and offsite construction practices, as other trades have done in the past.

“We have a culture and a philosophy at the Carpenters of NorCal that when technology advances happen, we don’t try to fight it,” he says. “We want to be part of it, embrace it, support it, to stay viable in the industry, and to create more opportunities for our members. Not every organization takes that tactic”

But at the same time, the assembly line manner of construction tasks in a modular factory just didn’t neatly fit the traditional separation of trades, tasks, and wages that are common in organized labor agreements. Bradshaw continued, “Can you imagine if we built cars like this? Materials showing up in a driveway and multiple trades working on their specific part of the project. We’d end up with cars each costing about \$800,000! We want to create good middle-class jobs while also trying to add to the inventory of affordable housing or everyone.”

So, NCCRC created what is called a “wall-to-wall contract” with modular factories. The idea is that the workers would be trained to do all aspects of the work, including electrical and plumbing, not just carpentry. And all the work in the factory would be covered by the carpenters’ union.

With a team of 35 full-time recruiters, NCCRC has been successful by targeting underserved populations in the construction industry such as women and minorities. But it’s not just the recruiting that makes this union successful. NCCRC trains its members at a facility near the two factories it currently represents, Factory OS and RAD Urban, each employing about 100 workers.

While the pay rate in the factory is lower than in the field, NCCRC still sees the benefit of this structure. “We’re elevating folks that don’t have opportunities and we’re going to help solve the housing crisis in



Northern California,” says Bradshaw. He sees this new technology (modular) as a way to address the housing shortage by making it less costly to build. He says that when developers are able to build more, that means more construction work. Ultimately, that means more people can afford to live and work in the same area.