

'Hard Hats' Reassess Their Political Views

By JAMES T. WOOTEN

Derek Wilkinson was taking a break from his Manhattan construction job one day last week, swigging beer with a couple of friends, when the subject of politics and patriotism was raised.

"We used to say, 'Love it or leave it,'" he said, shoving his orange helmet to the back of his head, "but now, well, I don't know. I don't think we say that much any more."

He spoke slowly, almost sadly, and although he probably did not realize it, he spoke for a large and growing segment of his fellow



Derek Wilkinson, bearded construction worker, speaking of politics: "You can't be as sure as you were before. There might be nothing wrong with a man—a candidate—but we're distrustful now." At left, during lunch hour here, is Michael Murphy.

Mood of the Voters

construction workers, the "hard hats" of America who were once the unchallenged symbols of unswerving chauvinism.

These days, however, as the nation approaches another election, many of them are struggling with that approach.

Scandal and Inflation

Scandal in high places, the resignations of Spiro T. Agnew as Vice President and of Richard M. Nixon as President, Mr. Nixon's subsequent pardon by President Ford, the offer of conditional amnesty to draft evaders and deserters, the soaring cost of living—all of these have taken their toll on the political psyches of the construction workers, and a new kind of uncertainty is emerging among them.

Where there once was unquestioning support for national policies, especially White House policies, there now is a sense of suspicion.

Where there once was a consensus in the comprehension of campaign language—law and order, Democrats versus Republicans, liberals vs. conservatives, pro-war, antiwar, and the like—there now is a Babel of translations.

Where once there was an abiding confidence in "leadership" and its ability to find eventual solutions to problems, there now is a gnawing pessimism about both.

Re-Examining Perspectives

It is not that Mr. Wilkinson, a 35-year-old Brooklyn resident, is on the verge of a radical about-face, but it seems apparent that, like thousands of other "hard hats" and millions of other voters in the country, he is at least re-examining his old perspectives.

"There are too many complications," he said as he finished his curbside lunch at a construction site in midtown Manhattan. "You like Wallace, and he gets shot. You vote for Nixon, and he's a criminal. You get behind Ford, and he spouts this amnesty-thing."

The noise of the mammoth building machinery behind him and the midday traffic in front of him nearly silenced his discourse, so, he

raised his Irish-tinted voice, and continued:

'We're Distrustful Now'

"You side with the Republicans and the construction business dies. You tolerate the phases—remember them? Phase One, Phase Two—and there's hard times. You vote for Rocky and he resigns."

"I'll tell you the truth," Mr. Wilkinson concluded, "you can't be as sure as you were before. There might be nothing wrong with a man

—a candidate—but we're distrustful now."

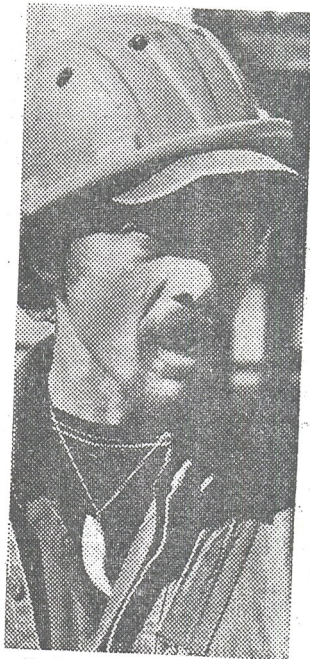
Even as his skepticism has been generated by what has been happening in the country, his uncertainties are at least partially rooted in what has happened to his industry.

It's downward spiral now is nearly two years old, and prospects for rejuvenation are dim. Individual "hard hat" incomes have dipped accordingly, and long idle periods have become more and more frequent.

Moreover, the face of the business has changed considerably. From the plumbers to the masons to the pipefitters, the "hard hat" these days is much younger, much better educated and better informed than in the past.

Four years ago last spring, about 200 construction workers waded into an antiwar protest on Wall Street and attacked anyone with a beard or long hair. Now, the hair beneath the hard hat is often down to the blue collars, while beards and mustaches are as common as callouses and sore backs.

Furthermore, their ranks have been swelled by hundreds of Vietnam veterans, many of them black and some with antiwar feelings as pronounced as those who declined to serve in the armed services or left the country to avoid induction. Still, it is not the war that



The New York Times/Edward Hausner

Roger Shapiro: "Politicians don't give a damn about the working man. . . . That's why we all got money problems."

"They just don't care," said Roger Shapiro, a 40-year-old New York plumber, sounding that recurring chord. The "politicians don't give a damn about the working man. They say they do when it's election time, but you can tell by what they do in office that they don't—and that's why we all got money problems."

Fewer Party Loyalists

As a result of this attitude, there seem to be fewer party loyalists now among their ranks. "And there's less and less of that every day," Mr. Shapiro added. "We're switchers now—all switchers. No Democrat and no more Republicans."

Nevertheless, the old conservatism is sometimes strong, and on some of the old bellwether issues there has been little deviation. Capital punishment wins hands down, amnesty in any form loses, the police are almost always right, the accused almost always guilty, and the courts in constant league with the criminals.

"And another thing," said Malcolm Malrey of Yorktown Heights, "always, always, the politicians are going to do you in because they just don't care about the little man. 'I guess I'll vote,' he added. 'I always do, but I'll tell you the truth, I don't know why.'"

occupies the attention of the "hard hats" these days. It is economic survival, just as it is with millions of other Americans, and that concern seems to have translated itself politically into a constant theme at construction sites throughout the country.