

Why Hard Hats Are Militant

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Although other workers participated in the huge New York rally on Wednesday in support of the Administration's Indochina war policy, it was obvious that its moving force was the hard-hatted construction workers.

Helmeted workmen were everywhere on floats and cement mixers, vigorously waving flags and exhorting the crowds to join in chanting over and over again, "U.S.A., all the way."

Close observers of the labor movement offered several explanations why the construction workers have become so militantly anti-radical in recent weeks. The main theme that emerged is that the hard hats have the closest thing to a military esprit de corps of any organized civilian workers.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 98,000 persons were employed in the construction industry in New York City as of last February. The average weekly paycheck at that time was \$229.45 as against \$176.42 in the previous year.

Although the figures seem high, analysts point out that the work is seasonal and that unemployment in construction trades is now about 7 per cent, or about double the average of the whole city work force.

What sets construction workers apart from other blue collar employees is the degree of danger in their job and the almost military teamwork that develops on the building site. Hard hats are not pinned down in factories, they work outdoors and have easily recognizable helmets, making them ready re-

cruits for street demonstrations.

The men who work in these relatively high-risk jobs cannot be tagged with any easy labels. It cannot even be said that the trade is white.

Several thousand Mohawk Indians are the city's outstanding workers in high steel — their current minimum wage is \$7.63 an hour. Another sizable group of construction workers comes from Newfoundland, while others are of Irish, Italian and Eastern European descent. Although there are few blacks in the trade, the local unions are regarded as less hostile to Negroes than in other major cities.

In conversation with hard hats, three themes recur repeatedly — dislike for long-haired students, an intense patriotism and a solidarity bred on the job.

Like many construction workers, Bill Wynn, a sheet metal worker from New York, has relatives in the service. His 22-year-old brother was killed last year in Vietnam, and Wynn wears a gold star. "Whenever I see those kinds insulting the flag," he says, "I think to myself, so this is the payment my brother got."

Another sheetmetal worker, Oscar Andresen of Yonkes, has a son of 26. How does his son feel about the war? "I never questioned him about it," said Andresen, who quickly switched to another topic.

There are varying degrees of passion among the workers, but it is obvious to anyone who talks with them that the demonstrations are as much directed against students as they are in behalf of the war.