

Live! From New York: Women Construction Workers in Their Own Words

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Introduction

In 1978, the U.S. Department of Labor set affirmative action goals for hiring women on publicly financed construction sites. The objective was to have female representation on these sites reach 6.9% of the total workforce. Women entering these occupations felt as though they would be the first of a wave of female applicants.¹ But a report issued in 1993 by the New York City Commission on Human Rights, entitled *Building Barriers: Discrimination in New York City's Construction Trades*, demonstrated the severe under-representation of people of color and women in the skilled trades. To quote: "... despite decades of efforts to integrate the construction industry, people of color comprise only 19% and women just 1% of the unionized, skilled construction workforce."²

This paper looks at the experiences of women working in construction in New York City. After more than 20 years in the trades, women are still invisible; still perceived as anomalies, or, in the words of carpenter Irene Soloway, as "the creature with two heads."³ Soloway says: "It's unbelievable. Sometimes, I'm working somewhere, and some woman goes, 'Oh, I've never seen a woman carpenter before.' And I'm like, Jesus Christ! I've been doing this for 15 years, and it's still considered really odd!"⁴

The experiences of women coming into the trades in the late 1970s have a lot to offer in an effort to understand what it is like to work in a "man's world" and why the numbers are so low. If we can understand the reality of the obstacles they faced, the response of their coworkers and their union leadership to their entrance into the trades, and the

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¹"The goals and timetables for hiring women on federally funded construction projects were set by the DOL under President Jimmy Carter on a trade-by-trade basis. These goals were to increase over a three-year period to 6.9% of the workforce. Additional regulations established that women should make up between a fifth and a fourth of each apprenticeship class ... The regulations established in 1978 blueprinted a course for the construction workforce just past the start of the millennium to become about one quarter female, making the occupation no longer a nontraditional one for women. This is not what happened. Women's overall percentage of the construction workforce grew to roughly two percent in the early 1980s and remained there." Susan Eisenberg, *We'll Call You If We Need You. Experiences of Women Working Construction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

²*Building Barriers: Discrimination in New York City's Construction Trades*. Report by the New York City Commission on Human Rights, 1993.

³Quoted in Eisenberg, 191.

⁴Interview with Irene Soloway, March 6, 1995.

ways in which they've survived and have secured a foothold for women, we can learn some valuable lessons which can benefit those women working in the trades today. And, by examining their experiences, we can posit some answers to the question as to why their numbers are still so small.

The oral history project, which forms the basis of this essay, was initiated as a way of capturing the experiences of women who were organizing in some way to improve conditions on their jobs and in their unions. I saw it as a way of providing models for women working in these jobs, and as an antidote to the helplessness felt by many women who felt overwhelmed and isolated, those women who believed that they couldn't organize until their numbers changed. Because I also had contact with many women who *were* organizing in a variety of ways, I decided to document their experiences. My questions focused on the set of circumstances that drew them to the work, how they got their training, their experiences on the job, and in their unions, and the organizing that they were engaged in to try and change conditions for others. The interviews were conducted between 1989 and 1997. The women I quote, with one exception, were part of the pioneering generation that broke into the trades in the late 1970s. This paper is based on the interviews.⁵ This is an encapsulated view of their lives. It leaves so much out. It presents only a partial picture of what it is like to walk in their boots, so to speak, and the complicated world that they inhabit, both on the job and in their unions.

The Obstacle Course: Getting in, Getting Trained/Staying in and Getting Work

In 1978, the feminist movement, the "women's movement," was part of the zeitgeist. The women entering the skilled trades were part of this movement. The women I interviewed were drawn by the movement and its idealism, and by the appeal of breaking new ground. Ann Jochems, still the *only* female carpenter working for New York City's Board of Education (1 of 170), discussed her decision to become a carpenter in these terms:

It sort of evolved out of the overall vision of just wanting to change the world that manifested itself in this particular way of being drawn to non-traditional work ... The traditional men's jobs paid more, and I ended up doing building repairs, then getting more skills, wanting to be self-sufficient, each of us should enable ourselves to know how to do anything, especially as women and feminists. Then I helped friends build a house and I got interested in it in that way. Then I got politicized from just hearing about unions ... and so the political nature of the pure union movement appealed to me.⁶

Janine Blackwelder, an iron worker who belongs to Ironworker Local 580, talked about her motivation. There is much to be gleaned from her comments about what motivated her:

I was the first woman iron worker, at least in this half of the century, possibly in the nation. Certainly I had political motivations for becoming an iron-worker. At the time, I had spent some years being very left oriented politically,

⁵The interviews are part of Oral History NS-#20, "Gender Relations in the Building Trades," at the Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University (NYU).

⁶Interview with Ann Jochems, July 26, 1990.



FIG. 1. Janine Blackwelder, ex-ironworker, outside her home, Chesterfield, Massachusetts, December 17, 1994. Photograph by Susan M. Morin.

and part of that was to have kind of this romanticized, positive view of the working class, you know, the noble proletariat, which, you know, I kind of think is a crock now. But I was clearly out there. I think I learned to deny it a lot, when guys would ask me, Are you trying to prove a point? And I'd say, No, I'm here for the money, just like everybody else. But no. My biggest point probably had to do with the situation with women in the country, 'cause I didn't think it was enough that women were breaking ground in terms of running an advertising agency or becoming an attorney, or an executive for some sort of corporation. I felt that things weren't going to change in this country until blue collar women had the same experiences and opportunities as men ... until working class women were being paid what working class men were being paid. And the only way you do that is by going after the same job.⁷

The building trades unions in New York City opened their doors to women because they were forced to, owing to a combination of the laws on the books, litigation to enforce those laws, and pressure from the women's movement, advocates, and tradeswomen organizing on their own behalf. The unions' response was less than welcoming. Barbara Trees, Carpenters Local 157, talked about getting into the apprentice program on her second try:

So the 2nd time around was when the devastation happened, 'cause we got on the line and we slept out overnight, and it was a crowd of women ... But what

⁷Interview with Janine Blackwelder, December 17, 1994.

happened is, leaving aside the guys dumping dirty pictures on us, which they did, they sort of let them fly through the air and kind of land where we were ... I mean, there was petty harassment going on, what happened is that, in the morning, somebody jumped the line. They tried to get up in front, and there were several thousand people outside that were then crushing against these two (glass) doors into the Carpenters Apprentice School. And I remember being just terrified ... this was a crush of men who basically didn't think you should be on the line. And what happened is that nothing was done about this crush. I remember looking up in the window and seeing Charles Fanning (Director of the Apprentice Program), and he was laughing, basically, and I guess he thought this was funny ... I had heard about him by then ... So he took a picture of us ... They called the police after 5 hours of us doing this pushing and shoving thing ... I'm basically being threatened by the guys. And very simply, the police separated us out into groups ... and that's all they had to do, but they waited. I felt it was kind of an indication of how they viewed the women coming into the union with absolute contempt.⁸

Trees remembers her experience at the Carpenters Apprenticeship School as a nightmare ... not the best circumstances to learn under. You just cannot learn in those circumstances, 'cause you're always worried. I was always worried about them touching me ... They'd cop a feel somehow or other. And this was not just on job sites. This happened at the Apprentice School ... I'd be up on the scaffold and this guy would somehow brush against my breast, or against my ass, or something like that. I didn't always challenge it because it happened too often. And it also just wreaked havoc in my life ... that was often what happened. There was just too much stuff to deal with ... they knew we were targets. They knew there were just a few of us ... I also got picked on a lot because I had very short hair. I was perceived, as I think all the women were, as being a lesbian. They just thought this was the funniest thing in the world, and they'd try to do all sorts of things to humiliate you. So that was the School. I remember it as a nightmare.

In addition to attending school, the women worked in the trades as apprentices. The numbers of females entering each trade were exceedingly small, and therefore most of the women faced the hostility directed at them on their own. Yvone Maiton, Operating Engineer, Local 30, talks about her first job as an apprentice:

There were 4 other women in my apprenticeship program and by the 3rd year, the other 3 dropped out ... I went into work and I was really very up. I was so happy to have gotten this job. And I had a kid to take care of so the money was very important to me. I remember seeing the men and I walked right up to them. I was such a silly girl! I told them my name ... and I went up to one guy in particular and he just stared back at me and didn't even put out his hand. I just stood there. And all of a sudden, all the reality just came and smacked me right in the face. This is what it's really going to be about.⁹

Elaine Ward entered the Plumbers Apprenticeship Program run by Local 2:

I think there were 3 women that were taken into the apprenticeship program

⁸Interview with Barbara Trees, June 2, 1995.

⁹Interview with Yvone Maiton, July 12, 1990.



FIG. 2. Elaine Ward, plumber, December 3, 1997. Photograph by Cara McCormick.

when I got my application in '85. March 1st, 1990 was when our dinner was. I was the only female graduating. You know, I went from \$11.80 to \$26.91 an hour. And I remember a guy who I knew was on my side, and he said to me something like "Your smile is all the way from here to Broadway." I had a permanent beam on my face. I really thought I had it made. When I was an apprentice, I thought they would all get used to me being around. They would see that I wanted to work, and I did this extra education, and showed up every day, and was on time, and worked hard and did whatever they told me, and that eventually, the harassment and/or hostility would decrease. But my perception of my experience is that it increased. And as I got closer to qualifying for the big bucks, my interpretation was that, because I was succeeding, then I was due for more hostility. And everything along the lines of the quote "intimidation" that I experienced was an attempt to really test my ability to persevere. But I believe that a lot of the intention of the guys who dished it out was to try to discourage the women.¹⁰

Evan Ruderman was in the second class of women to go through the Electrical Workers Apprenticeship Program:

After five and a half years of an apprenticeship, when I got my A card, it was *such* an incredible achievement to me. And the first day of my first job that I went on to, where I was making equal pay, was a *nightmare*. And my partner refused to work with me. And it was like, are we going back to square one? Are we starting all over again? You're saying you just tolerated me 'cause I was

¹⁰Interview with Elaine Ward, March 29, 1997.

making \$3.40 an hour? And now that I'm making what you're making, it's like ... an incredible thing started happening all over again. Every day, was not just one fight, but many fights. He would do things like, I'd leave to go get my material and he'd urinate right where I was working, and practically on my tools. Or I'd lay my ruler down, when I was measuring pipe, turn around, cut it, turn back around, my ruler was gone. It really built up.¹¹

In the face of daunting obstacles, the women were creative in developing coping strategies that allowed them to survive, to learn, and to keep working. Carpenter Rebecca Lurie remembered her problems at one project that had very cheap plastic laminated wall covering: "And I put the hole in the wrong place for the pipe, and that's the kind of thing you can't patch. And someone had got me this book during this time, *Against the Grain*, and there was an expression in it: 'a good carpenter knows how to fix her mistakes.' So I was all by myself, and there was this mantra that I just started chanting: A good carpenter knows how to fix her mistakes. And that was, for me, an experience, because I figured out a way to fix my mistakes." And she kept on finding ways to learn. She went to the library and read about fasteners. And went to the hardware store and asked "... more questions than they could tolerate. And I remember being very, very demoralized when I got laid off that they never had me do anything beside move materials, and I was very disappointed that they laid me off, 'cause I was the *best* damn materials handler around, and how could they lay me off? And it turned out to be a really good opportunity. I learned when one door closes, you can have better opportunities. So one of my strategies is to just keep on working."¹²

Ruderman, an activist in two grassroots tradeswomen's organizations—Women Electricians, and United Tradeswomen—wondered how the unions and the contractors were allowed to get away with so much illegal harassment:

I think each woman began to feel she had to develop her own strategy. I'll just speak for me. I really did begin to feel like, I've got to figure out some way to survive. I'm coming home with tears every day. I hate the world. I'm becoming really cynical. It seems like I can only relate to other women construction workers and talk shop. And I'm starting to have foul language. I was not conscious of the depth of harassment on the job, of how it was really going to the bone, to the heart. It's always perplexed me how, in the face of such blatant sexual harassment on such a daily basis, we never went to court. We followed legal channels to get women in, to fight for bathroom and changing facilities, for all these things, but we never did a class action sexual harassment suit. And why? We were scared of being blacklisted. We were scared of the fact that we had really put ourselves out there. I think that most of us who had been in the trades, and really hung our necks out, we were really beginning to also suffer from the effects of that. I'd go to a job and they'd have already made calls about me before I got there. So it was really difficult to try to establish the fact that I'm really not this person that you've been told that I am.

¹¹Interview on March 6, 1995, with Evan Ruderman, Irene Soloway and Lois Ross, on the subject of United Tradeswomen.

¹²Interview with Rebecca Lurie by Ann Jochems, February 28, 1995.

Strangers in a Strange Land

The world of high-rise construction is harsh, dangerous and violent, for the men as well as the women. Construction ranks at the top of the list for dangerous and difficult occupations. And one of the costs for doing this work is pain. Janine Blackwelder recalled that

In the last several years I was an ironworker, I had chronic back pains, and neck pain and all. I had a couple of injuries during the period I worked. And it wasn't until I ceased all heavy, physical work that I've been totally free of pain. And it's not just something particular to women. The men too, you know, after a certain number of years of being out in the bitter, bitter cold during the winter, and doing a lot of heavy work, there's a lot of aches and pains that go with that. I don't know how many really stick it out to retirement. I don't remember seeing that many old guys.

Marty Pottenger, carpenter, teacher, writer, and performance artist, in answer to a question about the inspiration for her *Construction Stories*, said: "I think the stories that always interest me are ... what's the mess we're in and what are the times we glimpse a way out of it. One was a story about a mason tender who, at that point, was 72 years old, who lifted 60 tons of block and mud everyday on the job, mason tender for 50 years. Here's this black man who's 72 years old, the only black guy on the job ... What is this about, you know?"¹³

Discrimination is an integral part of the corrupt world of the building trades unions in New York City. And corruption is endemic, corrosive, and cyclical. It manifests itself in myriad ways. Women are a threat not just because they are transgressing gender boundaries, but because they pose a threat to the established ways of doing business, based on bonds of loyalty and patronage. Each woman has her own vivid experiences to recount of having to face up to the immediate consequences of corruption on the job.

Plumber Elaine Ward saw the effects in her search to find work: "I would go to jobs and the Business Agents were, to put it quite bluntly, very hostile. And the more persistent I was, the more they made it clear that they were not going to do too much to help me and that it didn't matter what the laws were. It didn't matter if the jobs were supposed to have women on them. The contractors are not responsible to the union hall. And the officers in the union are not responsible directly to the members. This is what happens in practice."

As women were coming into the trades, they organized a number of independent, grassroots organizations, to advocate for jobs and enforcement of the laws and to provide support for each other. One of the most successful was United Tradeswomen (UT 1979–1984). Evan Ruderman talks about confronting the issue of corruption in UT:

We were on the edge between the dissidents within our unions, those who wanted to be more active and those (women) who were just interested in survival in their unions. We were on a thin edge. Most of the membership wanted just to survive in the unions, and a small minority, probably more active, wanted to shake the unions, transform them. With a membership of maybe 300 people, and maybe 25 people wanted to shake the unions. 250 didn't even think about wanting to do that because it was such an unusual

¹³Interview with Marty Pottenger by the author and Ann Jochems, September 27, 1994.

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JOIN UNITED TRADES♀ IN A PANEL/DISCUSSION ON AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

- View a film on affirmative action
- Inform yourselves about the history of the struggles of women & minorities for equal employment.
- Plan possible strategies

Panelists will include 4 members of U.T. & Gil Banks of Fightback.

An inexpensive homecooked meal will be served & childcare will be available

DATE: FEBRUARY 6th, 1981

TIME: DINNER: 6 P.M. PANEL: 7:30 P.M.

FIG. 3. Flier from the United Tradeswomen Collection, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU (UT, 1979-1984).

thing ... just to be able to get work and survive, and to keep a job. We were approached by some of the dissident organizations, including Carpenters for a Stronger Union (CSU was the most successful rank-and-file dissident group in the construction trades in NYC), who wanted to work with us, and we had a kind of edgy situation. We didn't have the sort of democratic kind of feeling, that this is something that most of the people in the organization feel comfortable with ... at the same time, it was kind of an instinct. If you're going to stay in the trades and survive, you need to reform them from within. So there was kind of a running tension within the organization.

The reality of corruption and mob control is everywhere apparent in the trades; Evan Ruderman again:

My first job with my A card was the Convention Center. I was working 7/12s ... 7 days a week, 12 hours a day. And the job had a lot of weird stuff

going on. The FBI was all over the job ... At this point on the job, I was being seen as a very serious agitator. I was accused of being a communist. I was red baited because I was a worker who had some consciousness, who would stand up ... It became scarier to do those things. The stakes were higher. My life was threatened on the job. Physical things started to happen. And I saw that you *can* be killed on construction. And it didn't matter if you were big time or small time. The Electrician's General Foreman at the Convention Center ... one of the biggest jobs at the time, was shot seven times and left in the company van. Who did he cross and what did he do? And Local 3 (IBEW) put out a ransom.

Evan Ruderman also talked about violence directed at other women: "Janine has a story, and Melinda, and then Cynthia ... and we had a situation with Nicky, which, to this day, is still a mystery. She was an electrician, and was very active in United Tradeswomen. And she was attacked on the job." Later she tried to say it was an accident, but "it was clearly not an accident. I mean, she could have died. Both her arms were sliced, she was left on the 21st floor, bleeding, and had to make her own way down." What was that all about? It could have been about many things. The environment, even for men, "is very rough ... And it's just mind boggling to me that we felt, at this time, that if you had the ovaries to be a woman and could *dare* to work in a man's trade, that this is what you were going to have to eat. So either eat it, swallow it, and stay alive and keep your mouth shut, leave, or get hurt."

One of the many corrupt practices in the building trades is the failure to pay union members their benefits. Plumber Elaine Ward talks about one such experience while working at Columbia University on the Science and Engineering building for a contractor called Hi Tech Mechanical:

And at the time I went on the job, the benefits were not being paid. And I remember asking some guys on the job—"Let's do this collectively." They were not even willing to call the (union) hall. One young guy said: "Oh, I only care about what's in my envelope." Another one's first, immediate response was: "If I'm out of work six months, I'll lose my house." The foreman on the job was the cousin of the President of the Local, and he said to me: "Honey, you have two choices. You can come to work every day, or you can go down to the hall and tell them you don't want to work." For the 4 months I was working there, it was almost 2 thousand dollars they owed me.

Her fight to get her benefits took place in 1990–1991. In 1993, the entire leadership of Local 2 was indicted for selling jobs, bribery, extortion, etc. Most pled guilty. Some went to trial and were convicted.

New York City's District Council of Carpenters has a long tradition of corruption. The most recent RICO indictments of the newly elected leadership took place in September 2000. Barbara Trees, Carpenters Local 157, became an activist soon after joining the union. On her first job, she learned that the contractor does not want anybody saying something about the work site situation. And unfortunately, "our union has acted the same way." She came to realize that the need for organizing was right at home, right there on the job. On being an activist, Trees says:

So anyway, I did those things. It doesn't take much. In an oppressive, repressed union that pushes everyone down, where lack of democracy is the way everything goes, when you do anything, it gets a great deal of notice ... The thing is, I've always tried to tell people how frightened I am because they

try to set you up as this kind of hero or something. Many people tell me I'm incredibly courageous. And I guess it's kind of true. But it's a part of me just says I have to do this stuff. I can't step back. When someone does something that is so much against what I believe in, I have to fight about it. I have to do it. So I would say, at the (Local) 608 meetings, yeah. I was very scared. And it took me a number of years. I'm going to be very honest. I would say it took me 14 years to be able to speak at my own local. And I've heard this from guys too. A couple of guys, dissident guys, in some of the other locals have said: "It took me 15." They said: "you've got me beat."

In 1995, in the 1st election in over 100 years where the members (under court supervision) had the right to vote for their officers through direct election, Trees ran for union office, both in her local, and for District-wide office on a re-constituted CSU slate.

Marty Pottenger, carpenter and teacher, describes teaching women coming into the trades about labor history:

Really, I haven't figured out any final way to talk about the corruption and everything, in a way that doesn't actually just add to the cynicism. And I talk about it, and it's like everybody's kind of given up about that, about what the possibilities are, and I understand that. I just feel it needs to be mentioned that, yes, they're corrupt, and yes, they're not *for* us, and yes, they've done all this stuff, i.e. allowing women in the unions, very much against their will. But these women know, and I know, it's so much in their interest. And it is in our lives anyway. I talk about the TDU movement and that people are out there. And yeah, I think they leave here with a sense that they are connected, definitely with a sense they're connected to a historical movement.

Against All Odds: The Next Wave

In a 1994 interview, Marty Pottenger said: "I teach 4 classes of 20 women a year, and I teach them shop, and tools, and safety, and blueprint reading, and we actually get to build survival skills to survive on the job and make our lives go the way we want. These are poor and unemployed women. Most of them have never used a hammer. I tell them they have to want more than the money. The money probably won't get them through the hard times. I mostly feel like a sense of humor and a sense of the big picture is what gets you through. And one of the little sayings I have is that ... 'he's an asshole, but he's my asshole.' But I actually call and talk to the women and a lot of times, they just cry, you know, 'cause they can hear my voice. And it's hard for me to envision that they're getting up at 4 in the morning, they're taking their kids somewhere by 5:30 or 5:00 a.m. and leave for the job at 6:00. They're at the job. They work this incredible job, you know, and they love it. They say they love it. I mean, it really is nice work. And it could be so much better."

Conclusion

To connect some of the current themes (class, gender),¹⁴ in the year of the millennium, women are still coming into the trades one by one and two by two. They're still being

¹⁴*Labor and The New Millennium: Class, Vision and Change.*

harassed, threatened and isolated. And they're doing all this without the strong support from the Women's Movement that underpinned their predecessors. We're still very far from the 6.9% goal and "Equal Opportunity."

In order to reap the benefits of the contributions that the pioneers made, we need to make access to blue-collar, skilled jobs a reality. The gains of the women's movement need to extend to working-class women. Otherwise, they'll be stuck in the female occupational ghettos, earning "59 cents for every man's dollar."

Epilogue

Did the women interviewed think of themselves as pioneers? Janine Blackwelder maintained:

Yes and no. Let me think about pioneers ... they were blazing new ground. They faced difficult odds. They met up with people who were friendly with them, and not friendly with them. And in that sense, I knew that it was going to be a different experience for myself and the people I would be working with. I had already some experience of working with a nontraditional job. But the fact is there were women around the job, even though they didn't have my particular skill, they had skills in other areas, and they were there. What I didn't really consider coming into building construction is what it would feel like to be surrounded *completely* by men and to almost never find another woman on any job site I was on. And I didn't think about it. And actually that's something that *does* affect me. Just to be surrounded by men, you know ... I don't know what to say about it. There's too much to say about it.¹⁵

¹⁵Interview with Janine Blackwelder, Ft. Greene, Brooklyn, August 1, 1990.