The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Tradeswomen Tell Their Survival Stories

written by Michael Hirsch | July 2, 2012

A SOCIOLOGIST tired of—if not ill-suited for—academic life and one of that generation of proper New Leftists committed to organizing or reorganizing the industrial proletariat as a necessary prelude to the much anticipated Red revolution, I hired in at a Midwestern steel mill in late summer of 1977. Among the first things I noticed as a production worker wasn't the absence of women workers—that fight had been fought and won thanks to civil rights agitation and enabling federal legislation that opened the job sluices to minorities and women—but a practice in which newly hired women in the entry-level labor gangs were assigned on day one to the dirtiest, most physically demanding and discouraging jobs in the mill. The advantage to management was two-fold: weed the women out or, failing that, assign them to lighter duty while consigning men to the brunt of the hump jobs. The game was clever: cull the females while getting men to despise the presence of female coworkers for the ostensible favoritism they seemed to receive.

It wasn't all management's doing. Working on the floor of a blast furnace, an older millwright told me he hated working with women. Why? Because he couldn't urinate over the platform's side anymore. Now he had to walk to the men's toilet 20 yards away. The horror!

That manufactured drama of keeping women out of well-paying but traditionally male occupations and playing on male fancy while using women (and earlier, people of color) as a wedge in fractionalizing a job-site workforce was common enough in the nation's labor market and understood, though the level of insidiousness added to foolishness was eye-opening.

In *Sisters in the Brotherhoods: Working Women Organizing for Equality in New York City*, part of Palgrave Macmillan's excellent Studies in Oral History series, labor writer Jane Latour is no less eye-opening as she lets dozens of women in craft positions in New York's construction trades exhaustively tell their own stories. For them, the jobs were hard enough; the disrespect and the mental pain were worse.

Latour writes that "as women began to compete for 'men's jobs' [statistically in areas where women made up less than 25 percent of the workforce] far outside the cultural norms, they needed to do more than just show up for work. From the start, this effort to find a place for females in the nation's steel plants, coal mines, skilled trades, police forces and fire houses—was conducted on contested terrain. To survive, the women had to organize."

Harassment by fellow workers alone made the workplace toxic. Before organizing, they had to put up with a work environment in which every gesture was a statement that you didn't belong, if not an implicit threat. These ran from the posting of spread-eagled, clinical pornography and barbed jokes—which numerous women told Latour was much more than simply men entertaining themselves at work—to threatening encounters and violence.

Even after winning a place in an apprentice program, female trainees were often denied the kind of instruction that would make them work-ready. Once certified as journeymen, these newly minted craft worker women faced job isolation, all tactics used consciously or unconsciously to force women out. A macho work ethic combined with pig ignorance to insist that women were "taking men's jobs" when the women themselves were often single heads of households and the sole providers of their

families; they needed the work. Even some unions did nothing to defend these women, when the union leaders themselves were not the instigators of the problem, as was the case with some of New York's uniformed services unions, who vigorously challenged court orders to open up their crafts.

By the 1970s, organizations such as United Tradeswomen were formed to offer political and emotional support in advocating for themselves as women in the skilled trades. Latour describes one pioneering publication as "a constant source of information, advice, humor and first-person accounts by women in a huge range of nontraditional jobs. The message was clear—we're doing this work, and you can do it, too."

Picket lines, maintained at trade shows, demanded jobs for women, and caucuses emerged to make the point that women's issues were class issues. As with civil rights, equity in the workplace was a mode for unifying and not dividing.

The trajectory for those resisting was never straightforward. While some worked with dissident men to reform their unions or went to the courts, others focused on survival tactics, though the line between the two was frequently and necessarily blurred when their common condition was isolation on the job.

One of those taking the more overtly political road was electrician Laura Kelber. As she told Latour, "What we were organizing for was the duty of fair representation. If you have a rule about men having a changing shanty, then the extension of that is, if you have women, you should have a changing shanty for women. So it's not about acceptance or recognition, it's about fair is fair. We never tried to bypass the [internal union] process."

For others, as plumber Elaine Ward put it, the need was to "face the fear" and "not take these things personally." Yet of the 60 people completing her four-year apprentice program in 1990 with her, she was the only female graduate.

Less than three weeks later, Ward testified at a hearing of the city's Human Rights Commission that:

> The reason women drop out of this business is not because of the work itself, but because of the harassment. The harassment is a symptom of a greater problem, which is that there are not enough women on the jobs. As long as I'm one woman alone on a job—and I must say that …99.9 percent of the time I have been the only woman on almost every job I have worked on. …. The harassment works. Eventually, the women are timid enough, exhausted enough, and tired of paying for shrinks to keep their sanity. They quit.

Stationary engineer Yvone Maitan told Latour about a conversation she had with a male co-worker who was shocked, shocked about the anger she exhibited from all the pressure she was under just to keep her job. He told her he had endured apprentice school and worked the same as Maitan, but without problems. So what was her beef?

> I told him, "You had a wife to cook, clean and take care of the kids and make your lunch and wash your clothes and make sure the kids didn't disturb you while you were studying. I have to do all that by myself. If I had a wife, I wouldn't feel guilty, either, and school and work would be a cinch. I'd be able to concentrate my extra energy on getting you guys off my back." He responded, "Oh, I hadn't thought of that."

Latour's powerful narrative shares with Barbara Wertheimer's 1977 classic, *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America*, an appreciation that women's work outside the home and the attendant sexual discrimination and harassment were not peculiar or aberrant incidents but central to working class life. As an ethnography of work culture, with its focus on what these craftswomen have to say in rich detail about their own years-long experiences, Latour's is outstanding. That alone makes it required reading.

It also shares with Wertheimer an absence of any exhaustive or persuasive explanation about gender discrimination that is more than attitudinal. That's not a criticism of either author; their stories and their grasp of the problem's scope stand alone. It is rather an appreciation of what else needs to be understood. Latour's book is replete with examples of just how hard it was—and is—for women working outside the home to receive parity in training and job opportunities and civil treatment from men. The next question is explaining why the problem persists.

As a portrait of gender discrimination limited to one industry in one city, it also needs national and international comparisons to be fully understood. Was the series of heartbreaking experiences and the blindness or culpability of the New York City unions a general problem affecting women everywhere in traditional male-dominated workplaces, or stories peculiar to one city's construction trade? When one worker tells Latour that her ability to travel nationally brought her in contact with a far more inclusive and tolerant workforce, is that because the particular skill required was so rare that a job shortage meant the work ethic was "y'all come" instead of "go away"? Or are construction workers elsewhere simply nicer people?

Latour tends to play up the early National Organization for Women and its proclivities for helping its working class sisters, comparing it to the fight for women's rights waged by upper class matrons who supported the early twentieth century's Women's Trade Union League. The comparison is tricky, given that the WTUL collapsed precisely because of tensions between the class interests of the trade union women and the cultural aspirations of the society dames.

She also mistakenly trivializes the opposition to passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, when she writes that arch Virginia segregationist Howard Smith, then Democratic chairman of the powerful House Ways and Means Committee, proposed including women in the statute "as a joke." It was no joke, but a savvy attempt to scuttle the whole civil rights bill, said feminist historian Jo Freeman, whom Latour ironically cites as her source.

In *How 'Sex' Got Into Title VII: Persistent Opportunism as a Maker of Public Policy*, Freeman writes that Smith indeed

> rose up and offered a one word amendment to Title VII, which prohibited employment discrimination, [by adding] "sex" to that one title of the bill in order 'to prevent discrimination against another minority group, the women'…. (110 Cong. Rec., February 8, 1964, 2577). This stimulated several hours of humorous debate, later enshrined as "ladies' day in the House," before the amendment was passed by a teller vote of 168 to 133.

Freeman concludes that

> Despite the humor that Smith injected into the "Ladies' Day" debate, what evidence there is does not indicate that he had proposed his amendment as a joke.

For Freeman, it was done to confront unions who—even as late as 1964, were not interested in seeing legislation, including an Equal Rights Amendment that conservatives then counterintuitively supported, allowing a flood of new workers to compete for plum construction and well-paying manufacturing jobs. www.jofreeman.com/lawandpolicy/titlevii.htm

Latour also relays the repeated testament by her workers that, except for the harassment and the borderline violence, many said they "love their job." Here Latour is acting the faithful scribe, but I wish she had gone beyond reportage to ask them even tentatively about the nature of their work under corporate rule. Because finding joy in wage labor is a statement that would shock Paul Lafargue, if not Marx himself. Even intricate craftwork under capitalism is alienating and distorted by the profit motive and capital's plan.

The work is dangerous, too, with Latour citing statistics showing construction site fatalities accounting for 20 percent of all workplace deaths.

It's understandable that women in dead-end, low-paying jobs would attest with brio to the advantages of a skilled and high-paid position, or that the daughters of craft workers would fight for the same privileges, job protections, and the fairer treatment their fathers received. Still "love" is a strong word for work in an industry where construction projects follows market demand for office building, private prison construction, luxury developments, and highways over affordable housing, schools, and mass transit. What's "good" about craft jobs with those outcomes is something skilled trades unions never ask. It's a fair enough question for a new multigendered workforce, especially one chockablock with insurgents out to democratize their unions.

The late Murray Kempton observed in effect that New York's construction trade unions would support the Nazi building of crematoria if it provided union jobs. The thought doesn't improve when hard-pressed working women seem to adopt the same paradigm.

These criticisms aside, Latour's narrative lets her subjects speak eloquently and on point about the travails of work as actually lived and how women in a virtually all-male industry fought back courageously and against terrific odds to humanize their workplaces. If Latour's book did nothing else—and it does much more—it would still deserve the widest reading.