A JOURNAL OF IDEAS, ANALYSIS AND DEBATE
newLaborForum

Hard Hats & Homophobia: Lesbians in the Building Trades

Frank, Miriam. **New Labor Forum**. New York: Jun 30, 2001. , Iss. 8; pg. 25

Abstract (Summary)

Barbara Trees is a New York City carpenter who has identified herself as both gay and straight: "I've been called a lesbian when it's not true and it's not fair, and I've been called a lesbian when it was true and they're gonna kill you if they find out." 14 Trees tells the story of how she and another woman ("who was straight as an arrow!") wanted a shanty where they could change their clothes in privacy. The steward cursed her, but after a series of complaints to the local, the order came to "send the bitches down to build the shanty." When the women completed the task, "the men shit in the shanty and wrote on the door `Lesbians Local 69.'" 15

In spite of the intimidations and awkwardness, lesbians in the trades do not always hide, and when they come out on the job, the outcomes are not always bad. Some lesbians explain that in the context of a buddy relationship with a straight man the revelation neutralizes sexual undertones and strengthens the bonds that job partners feel for one another. Such a buddy relationship works well when the woman has been working with the same man for a while and is trusted as a steady, dependable, and skilled co-worker. [Karen Wheeler] enjoyed a sense of sexual safety: "My being a lesbian and very much of a tomboy is interesting. I'm some kind of in-between sex. There's not that kind of tension, sexual dating tension. They can talk to me about sports, we get along." 22 [Nancy Brown] has also put the emphasis on camaraderie: "I found that there are a lot of men who really like to work with me. I'm considered a good worker, conscientious, nobody has to carry me along. There have to be close ties, just from working together and talking, sharing thoughts and feelings and trying to keep the day on the upside for everyone." In addition, she has neutralized her situation by controlling who will know and how she will tell about herself: "They'll say `My wife did this and that,' and I'll say, `Well, my roommate and I and so forth.' Most of them choose not to read that phrase." 23

My boss told me his daughter is a lesbian, and I told him about me and I told him that's just great. He came with this cliche, "I think it could be a sad and lonely life," and I said, "No!" He and his wife marched in gay pride a couple years after that with a church group... I had "No on 13" stickers on my toolbox and on my bumper. The coffee shop is where you get gossip and advice, you do your troubleshooting. We always sit in a group and I noticed that a couple guys were wearing "Yes on 13" buttons. I think it was a little because of me, but also because they believed it. I talked to one guy and came out to him, and his sister-in-law is a lesbian. He wouldn't use the word lesbian, dyke, queer. He just said "your lifestyle." They just wore the buttons one day, but I continued to have it on my toolbox. 28

Full Text (5916 words)

HARD HATS & HOMOPHOBIA: Lesbians in the Building Trades

CONNIE ASHBROOK'S CAREER IN NONTRADITIONAL WORK HAS COVERED A VARIETY OF union experiences: she has been a school bus driver, a truck driver, and a carpenter. Since 1982 she has been an elevator mechanic and a member of Portland, Oregon's Local 23 of the International Union of Elevator Constructors. Like so many other women who work in the trades, she is a feminist; and like many other feminist

tradeswomen, she is also a lesbian. Ashbrook observes:

There is a higher proportion of lesbian tradeswomen than there are lesbians in the general public. As lesbians we are challenging the status quo anyway, so we challenge the gender roles as well, and there isn't the stigma about being strong and capable. A lot of times we have a partner at home who is much more supportive than a male partner would be with all the ego things about who does what kind of work and who makes what kind of money. It pays good money, so women who know they have to earn a living, they think about the trades. 1

Her sense of a disproportionately high number of lesbians in the building trades derives not from any specific data but from many years' experience in nontraditional labor, from networking in local lesbian communities, and from involvement in local and national tradeswomen's organizations that for decades have provided support and self-help to women doing nontraditional work. 2

The work culture of construction sites makes it problematic (if not dangerous) for lesbians to reveal directly their sexual identities. Nevertheless, anecdotes from the informal subcultures of nontraditionally employed women confirm Ashbrook's impression of a wide lesbian presence. Some of these women are self-employed or work for small nonunion contractors; but I have also met and recorded the stories of many self-identified, out, white lesbians who are rank-and-file members of the building trades unions. 3 Each lesbian union member has her own story of survival on the job, but all lesbians, whether out or not, have been dyke-baited.

One woman carpenter who has trained women for apprenticeship "believes that almost every tradeswoman at one time or another is `dyke-baited' by co-workers or other people in her life." 4 Dyke-baiting is a clear and frequent expression of male hostility when men's power and privileges are threatened by women's transgressions of traditional gender roles. Dyke-baiting pressures straight women to prove themselves as "real" women, and it pressures gay women to stick to the closet, thereby weakening female solidarity. As a form of sexualized intimidation against the entire female minority employed at the construction workplace, dyke-baiting conflates sexism with homophobia, and so diminishes the status of all women, gay and straight.

The divisiveness of dyke-baiting reinforces the social isolation of lesbians and also encourages more traditional gender roles for straight women. The custom of "feminizing" women on construction jobs relegates them to "go-fer" jobs, like holding signal flags or going for coffee. Women construction workers are thus caught in a bind: the more they look for approval and defer to the men, the less likely it is that they will advance in the trade. It takes a different level of aggression to insist that heavy and complicated work must be regarded as women's work too. Because they are restrained from acquiring more sophisticated job skills (which they must learn from men), women become less eligible for advancement in the trade and less likely to rise to positions of responsibility.

THE FEMINIST CHALLENGE

LESBIANS' STORIES IN THE CONSTRUCTION industry are in many ways consistent with the stories of all women workers who must contend with sexist apprenticeship and hiring practices, harassment on the job, and the exclusionary traditions of their unions. But while lesbians face the same problems as other women on these jobs, and, like many of their straight sisters, have a keen sense of themselves as feminist pioneers, they have also reported dynamics and responses that relate to their particular status in the construction trades as a minority within a minority.

In the late 1970s, the feminist movement encouraged many women to break into nontraditional careers. The high pay, the training in specialized skills, and the security of a unionized workplace made the building trades attractive to women willing to meet the challenges of tough physical working conditions in male-dominant workplaces. Pride in a job well done was also a high priority in these women's career choices: like all other construction workers, they enjoy the sight of the buildings, the bridges, the roads, and the renovations--the results of their efforts.

For decades since World War Two it had been all but impossible for any woman to get a job in construction. Executive Order 11246 (1978) and Department of Labor regulations required increases in female apprenticeships and hiring on federally funded construction projects. With the boost of these regulations, the pioneers of nontraditional work formed citywide support organizations (e.g., Hard Hatted Women of Cleveland or United Tradeswomen of New York City). 5 The groups encouraged women's efforts in the rigorous apprenticeship process and supported the continuation of hard-hatted careers. However, the actual average for female participation in construction labor has hovered around 2 percent since the mid-1980s. 6

In crossing the gender barrier to make a living, many lesbians felt liberated from conventional feminine behaviors. Proving their physical prowess and acquiring mechanical skills brought them admiration from their friends; and they liked developing their muscles and wearing their flannel shirts, work-boots, and tough overalls. A woman's decision to enter the trades can be a consequence of a lifelong search for lesbian self-realization. Mary Walshok found tradeswomen to be risk takers who "have been forced to independent action." They were girls who grew up "different" and were "extremely athletic... dating less than other girls; identifying themselves as tomboys.... Dreams and fantasies about being an adventurer... were common to most of the pioneers." 7 In 1976 when Karen Wheeler was hired as a welder's apprentice at the Quincy (Massachusetts) Shipyards, "there were 3,000 men and 50 women.... I knew there was a connection between being a lesbian and doing non-traditional work. I didn't feel that I could dress for traditional jobs." 8

From the start these women were not only challenging social conventions of gender and behavior but also storming important institutional male bastions: the craft unions. To work in construction, they would have to join union brotherhoods, the backbone of the traditional craft labor movement. The building trades unions have always struggled to maintain control of the labor supply in a seasonal and project-driven labor market. Job openings are limited, but wages are high. But such controlling policies have also led to patterns of exclusion: these unions are the least racially integrated, most organizationally rigid, and politically conservative groups in the labor movement.

The building trades unions' resistance to change became ferociously apparent when women began vying for the jobs in the late 1970s, sometimes challenging apprenticeship and hiring practices with federal lawsuits. Many master craftsmen, journeymen, and even apprentices perceived the arrival of women into their domain as a terrible affront. That women could so substantially increase their own earning power was as much of a threat as the female acquisition of craft skills. It was as if they were violating a masculine mystique: a father-to-son tradition in which tools and specialized craft techniques like pipe bending and wood joining were passed from one generation to the next. 9

SEXIST RESISTANCE, LESBIAN DETERMINATION

MEN HOSTILE TO WOMEN'S ENTRY INTO the crafts have tried to force women out of the trades by refusing to cooperate in the training of women apprentices. They have also made the women targets of a wide range of constant harassment--from overt ridicule to unwanted sexual advances to threats of physical violence. In so doing, they have not especially discriminated against lesbians over any other women who have encroached on their territory. Nevertheless, some lesbians have fared quite well by facing men's resistance and standing up to the hazing.

Nancy Brown, who in the early 1980s served her four-year apprenticeship in Detroit's Local 58 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, reacted with a positive work attitude when she wasn't wanted on the job site. She recalls:

On my first job, the man I worked with every day said, "Women don't belong in this trade." He was laughing hysterically, and I just laughed and said, "Well that's okay but while I'm here, what would you like me to do.?" So he did a lot of work with me, and then I worked with another journeyman. Pretty soon he wanted me to work with him, because I was willing to do whatever had to be done. 10

But often the trouble that men at construction sites have given to "encroaching" women workers has been less simply resolved. Ashbrook remembers when she drove a truck on a remote construction site in eastern Oregon:

There was a little campground near where the construction ended and I lived in a little trailer that I rented that sat on the back of my pickup truck. My lover came out and visited me once, which was fun. The second in command was this guy from a little town on the border of Idaho and Oregon. The day one of the regular drivers was sick, he said, "I'll go with you." He made it clear to me that I would be able to continue driving the truck if I would sleep with him. I said I wasn't interested. He was a total jerk. His wife was on the job, flagging, and he hits on me--slime! I never got to drive the truck again. 11

The presence of female workers on male turf can prompt even heavier and sexualized retaliation. Just about every woman who works in construction, whether gay or straight, has her story about harassment. Pornography, profanity, violence, and other humiliations are common tactics. 12

Although sexism is the main element in most of these scenes, women construction workers have also reported frequent and intense dyke-baiting. The anthropologist Francine Moccio quotes "Karen," a journeyworker: "You could be the most feminine woman on the job.... If they don't like you, [they] say you are gay. There is a constant discussion about which women are gay and which are straight." Moccio remarks that "women who were politically active, displayed self-confidence, showed physical strength or tried to change their work environment were considered gay no matter what their sexual orientation." 13

Barbara Trees is a New York City carpenter who has identified herself as both gay and straight: "I've been called a lesbian when it's not true and it's not fair, and I've been called a lesbian when it was true and they're gonna kill you if they find out." 14 Trees tells the story of how she and another woman ("who was straight as an arrow!") wanted a shanty where they could change their clothes in privacy. The steward cursed her, but after a series of complaints to the local, the order came to "send the bitches down to build the shanty." When the women completed the task, "the men shit in the shanty and wrote on the door `Lesbians Local 69.'" 15

ON THE JOB AND IN THE CLOSET

ANY WOMAN ON A CONSTRUCTION SITE, whatever her sexual orientation, is fair game for antigay harassment, and so it is no surprise that many lesbian construction workers closet themselves. They understand that public acknowledgment of sexual identity could be an invitation to major danger. At a 1990 United Tradeswomen of New York City workshop on "Homophobia in the Building Trades," one woman who had come out to her co-workers described how they locked her into a room in an unfinished building and left her there as night fell. She eventually made her way out of the trap and left the construction site terrified and angry.

Because of the divisiveness of dyke-baiting, solidarity among women, even within the safety of tradeswomen's networks, is not a sure thing. "As a lesbian I've found that occasionally heterosexual women are scared to befriend me for fear that men on the job would think they were lesbian," writes a carpenter from British Columbia. 16

Some lesbians fear that their straight female co-workers might try to divert the men's antagonisms by exposing them as "real lesbians." And so, even though all the women need each other for support in the hostile male work culture, the lesbians keep their guard up.

Ashbrook describes that tension of support and suspicion when she was a carpenter's apprentice in Portland in the early 1980s. "At the Tradeswomen Network, the bond was to get through the day. When we were off the job, we were so glad to be with another woman who understood what it was like out there, being a lesbian was kind of irrelevant. Still, we weren't that out to the straight women except the ones we knew were safe." 17 And Wheeler remembers the Quincy Shipyard in 1976 as "scary for women," but treacherous for lesbians:

Most of the lesbians were closeted. All the women used to take their break together. We mysteriously all had to go to the bathroom together at the same time, and we would hang out and just share stories, say how our days were going. There were many times when there would be ten women in the bathroom. Eight of us would be lesbians and the two nonlesbians might be making some homophobic crack and none of us would say anything!... It was so horrible, so closeted, the fear of giving the guys one more bit of ammunition. All of us, we would go to the bar after work, and there would be a lot of eye-rolling, talk about our ambivalence and hard feelings about not saying anything, feeling tempted to say something but also being scared. 18

There are other situations where straight women will confront antigay harassment. Remembering when she broke into the carpentry trade in New York City in the 1980s, Irene Soloway tells how many of the straight women in United Tradeswomen "would not admit to not being lesbians. They didn't want to have to prove themselves as heterosexual. They just wouldn't say what they were. It was an act of solidarity." 19 Brown recalls, "I've heard comments--so-and-so is a lesbian.... One woman who was a friend of mine was aware of my relationship, and this fellow came up and started making comments about another woman, and I didn't have to open my mouth, she jumped right down his throat: `Is it anybody's business what you do in bed or who with--and why would that have anything to do with--' and he backed right away from her...that shut him up."

Brown was working as a foreman on a Detroit construction site one day when she understood her vulnerability as a lesbian.

The Labor Department came out, and the job needed a woman and I was selected. The boss came in and said,

`Well I don't care who works for me, if they do the job, I don't care if they're a man or a woman or black or white or what color they are, as long as they're not gay! Somebody gay would be fired!' That was a warning. I thought I'd better keep to myself--they don't like you, you've gone.

Through her friendships in the gay community, Brown knew that this particular employer's right-hand man, an office worker and estimator, was gay. Once at a company social event, she tersely commented, "I believe we have friends in common," to which he replied, "`I believe we do.'" 20

BUILDING TRUST

About relationships with her male co-workers, Brown wryly comments:

Construction workers--some are really open and liberal and some are totally closed. The ones that are closed and they really like you, anything bad that goes against their grain they're going to deny. You develop close ties with a lot of these men and they'll defend you if someone is saying anything bad about you, whether it's true of not.... One fellow I worked with, he didn't like women in the trade. He didn't like a lot of things. But when someone down at the hall said they thought I was a lesbian, he wanted to beat the guy up--in my defense! 21

In spite of the intimidations and awkwardness, lesbians in the trades do not always hide, and when they come out on the job, the outcomes are not always bad. Some lesbians explain that in the context of a buddy relationship with a straight man the revelation neutralizes sexual undertones and strengthens the bonds that job partners feel for one another. Such a buddy relationship works well when the woman has been working with the same man for a while and is trusted as a steady, dependable, and skilled co-worker. Wheeler enjoyed a sense of sexual safety: "My being a lesbian and very much of a tomboy is interesting. I'm some kind of in-between sex. There's not that kind of tension, sexual dating tension. They can talk to me about sports, we get along." 22 Brown has also put the emphasis on camaraderie: "I found that there are a lot of men who really like to work with me. I'm considered a good worker, conscientious, nobody has to carry me along. There have to be close ties, just from working together and talking, sharing thoughts and feelings and trying to keep the day on the upside for everyone." In addition, she has neutralized her situation by controlling who will know and how she will tell about herself: "They'll say `My wife did this and that,' and I'll say, `Well, my roommate and I and so forth.' Most of them choose not to read that phrase." 23

For Wheeler, who had winced at the antigay banter in the women's bathroom at the Quincy Shipyard and would have never come out to many of the straight women on the crew, a more trusting relationship developed with her straight-male work partner. She "never had a girlfriend long enough to introduce" but very quietly and confidentially, she did come out to him:

I had this best friend, Fuzzy, who everybody used to think we were having an affair, but they couldn't quite figure it out because I was definitely not affair material. He was a married guy, and he knew I was a lesbian. I told him. We didn't see each other outside of work. We were on the same crew for about two years and he'd come and find me for lunch and we'd have lunch together. He couldn't figure out how he had a friendship with a woman. 24

Having trusting relationships like this with individual co-workers is important on construction sites. Workers must depend on each other when they are moving around on precarious structures, handling dangerous and heavy materials, working with potentially hazardous equipment, using chemicals, operating torches, or conducting live current. They have to anticipate trouble, and they have to be aware of the nuances of their work partners' physical movements. Though it may have little to do with life off the job, a life-saving intimacy can develop between workmates.

Brown has worked on and off with the same man for more than ten years. Their closeness is important to both of them, but some parts of her story are left unspoken:

He considers me his best friend. We never discussed my relationships, but he's been here [to my house] and he has to be aware. He's never asked, and I don't think he wants to hear. It's like my parents. But I know if I was five hours out of town and my car broke down, if I called him he'd jump in his car and be there. That's the type of relationship we have. My sexuality has nothing to do with him. It isn't that important. 25

Some lesbian tradeswomen are more overt. Carpenter Irene Soloway got hired into the New York City hospital

system in 1986. It was a steady civil service job, one that decreased the sense of intimidation she used to feel when she had to go to the union hall for shape-ups. With her position secure, she was elected shop steward. Working with a regular crew on interior repairs, she felt confident about coming out on the job, and she joined in with the men's sex talk:

It was nice to be fluid about sexuality. They had such lesbian envy. They thought being a lesbian was the sexiest thing, because you get women. They wanted to borrow my lesbian magazines, porno magazines like On Our Backs. But I said, "I don't want it back after you've used it--go find your own pornography!"... My work partner, Arthur, from Ireland, he was very sweet, very innocent. He didn't know what a blow job is until he came to New York. He wanted to know what we do in bed. I told him there, on the ladder, I said, "Arthur, I'll tell you in graphic detail--do you really want to hear it?" And he said, "No, maybe not." 26

But for most tradeswomen whose situations are more vulnerable, coming out to co-workers is a much less direct process. Brown has found that she can make her gayness known by expressing her opinions on current events. She has used these political discussions to shift the subject of homosexuality to a less personal and therefore less charged forum:

I do talk about gay rights in the news. When we talk about AIDS I express my opinion. A lot of times people agree with me. Once we were sitting there and it was the gays in the military issue, and this guy said, "I don't know, I don't get it, I don't see what the problem is." The other guys said, "I don't either. I don't care who anyone sleeps with. As long as he can shoot straight I don't care what he does or who he does it with." 27

Not all topical conversations are that casual. Oregon in the early 1990s was a hotbed for gay and antigay politics. Measures 9 (1992) and 13 (1995) were statewide voter referenda that would have mandated discrimination in public employment. The political campaigns around these ballot measures made homosexuality a more public issue than had ever before been possible. For Ashbrook, as for many other people throughout the state, political discussions with co-workers were highly charged:

I came out to my business agent over Measure 9. I said that this issue is very important to me because it will affect me personally. He told me he knew already. He made some sort of joke, "Well I always said, you can't knock something unless you've tried it, and I'm not about to try it." Another guy, we were talking about Measure 9 and bigotry in Oregon and he told me he knew, when he said something about "people like yourself."

Many gay and lesbian workers throughout Oregon came out on the job during the referenda campaigns. Straight people were also pushed by the political campaign to identify themselves as allies or opponents of their gay co-workers. Ashbrook remembers that straight co-workers came out to her about their own lesbian and gay relatives, people whose political and economic legitimacy would have been worsened by the passage of the laws:

My boss told me his daughter is a lesbian, and I told him about me and I told him that's just great. He came with this cliche, "I think it could be a sad and lonely life," and I said, "No!" He and his wife marched in gay pride a couple years after that with a church group... I had "No on 13" stickers on my toolbox and on my bumper. The coffee shop is where you get gossip and advice, you do your troubleshooting. We always sit in a group and I noticed that a couple guys were wearing "Yes on 13" buttons. I think it was a little because of me, but also because they believed it. I talked to one guy and came out to him, and his sister-in-law is a lesbian. He wouldn't use the word lesbian, dyke, queer. He just said "your lifestyle." They just wore the buttons one day, but I continued to have it on my toolbox. 28

UNION INVOLVEMENT

UNION-BASED CAMPAIGNS FOR LESBIAN and gay rights have had very little impact on the brotherhoods to which these lesbian workers pay dues. Progressive innovations of the public sector labor movement like domestic partner bereavement leave and health benefits are not easy to move onto the building trades' bargaining agendas. Unlike shop steward Soloway, most of the women I interviewed have not taken on public responsibilities. Nevertheless, they do take pride in their craft and are glad to be working union.

Ashbrook had a background in the Portland labor movement well before she joined Elevator Constructors Local 23. A lesbian co-worker already on the executive board made Ashbrook feel welcome at union meetings, so she decided to join in. For two years she wrote a regular report from Local 23 for the International's monthly newspaper,

The Elevator Constructor, and for another two years she was recording secretary. She has also sat on the executive board and has served as a vice-president of the local.

Like many other women who go into union politics, Ashbrook has been involved in reforming her union. She has been a part of the challenge slate in contested elections, and she stands with other local members in their efforts at maintaining secret ballots in elections, getting more contract information from the International, and pushing business agents to be more accountable to the rank and file at job sites.

Reforms that speak to the status of lesbian and gay workers are also possible. They are most likely to succeed in building trades locals where insurgent workers have succeeded in pressuring their organizations to take a more progressive stand on affirmative action goals. But progressive union politics are only part of the picture. When it comes to lesbian and gay rights, it makes a difference if the local union is located in a community where lesbian and gay reforms have already been firmly established through municipal human rights ordinances. In communities where more liberal public sector unions have negotiated gay rights in their union contracts (nondiscrimination language, domestic partner benefits, etc.) the pressure on the more conservative building trades in the local labor community to keep pace with community standards is substantially intensified.

This was the case in San Francisco in the mid-1990s, where a rank-and-file movement fighting nonunion contractors brought new leadership into Carpenters Local 22. Women carpenters were a part of that insurgency, and in the late 1990s affirmative action hiring and apprenticeship policies were strengthened. As a result of these less restrictive practices, younger women came into the trade and reinvigorated women's participation in Local 22. Business agent Donna Levitt, a straight feminist who advocated for her lesbian co-workers observes:

These new activists are bold young women. They're out and obvious about their lesbianism. They have short hair dyed in bright colors. One of them made a motion that the local donate to the Pride at Work convention. It made me very nervous that anyone would suggest such a thing. We had never discussed that at the union, but it was nothing to the woman who made the motion. And then it passed--unanimously! 29

At the 1996 general membership meeting, a coalition of lesbian and straight women in Local 22 successfully passed a motion to request domestic partner benefits from the Carpenters' Trust Fund (the labor management body that administers benefits in northern California). The letter was quickly tabled by the trustees, but in 1997 the City of San Francisco passed an ordinance requiring contractors doing business with the city to provide benefit equity. The debate at the Trust Fund then centered around suing the city or going along with the reform. Levitt lobbied the trustees to accept the reform, explaining that domestic partner benefits would actually cost the Trust Fund very little.

Because fewer than 100 carpenters--some with opposite-sex partners, others with same-sex partners--applied for the benefits in the first few years of their availability, the reforms were, as Levitt had predicted, not at all expensive. 30 Nevertheless, the breadth of this change is considerable. The Carpenters Trust Fund covers not only Local 22 of San Francisco but Carpenters' Union locals throughout northern California. Thus, since 1997, domestic partner benefits have been available to 15,000 working carpenters and 10,000 retirees covered by the fund throughout northern California. For this segment of the unionized building trades, recognition of domestic partner status is now a matter of policy. This important reform allows all lesbian and gay union members, whether they register or not, an equitable share in the pride, security and dignity of union membership.

PROSPECTS AND CONCLUSIONS

LIKE ALL OTHER WOMEN CONSTRUCTION workers, lesbians in the trades go through years of toughening to acquire their expertise, and they work hard for good money; yet some of the best workers drop out. Like all other women in the trades, lesbians need support--from their families, from their co-workers, from their unions--to achieve success in these well-paid, challenging jobs.

Alliances with straight women are often focused on the simple maintenance of a workplace at which all women can work in dignity. As long as all women can be threatened by dyke-baiting, the defense of lesbians as a particular group within the already embattled female workforce will continue to be a goal regarded ambivalently by gay and straight women alike. 31 Furthermore, as long as dyke-baiting persists and is tolerated at construction worksites, the desire of women to mutually support one another is necessarily weakened and the possibility of female solidarity in construction is seriously undermined.

While sexism and homophobia are rampant throughout the construction-industry culture, the recent example of the domestic partners benefits program in the Northern California Carpenters Union demonstrates an exciting new direction. In the broader labor movement, lesbian and gay rights have become increasingly important issues, and the special subculture of the construction worksite cannot remain isolated. Likewise, straight male construction workers cannot continue to ignore the ever more visible presence of lesbians and gay men in their communities and their families. These workers could be allies of their lesbian workmates, and their support could ease many of the tensions that hinder all women's opportunities in the trades.

Construction unions have a strong stake in halting the dyke-baiting that has tormented both gay and straight tradeswomen. Throughout the country, these unions are being seriously challenged by the encroachment onto major construction projects of nonunion contractors; if good wages and high industry standards are to prevail, unions must commit themselves to more aggressive organizing of an increasingly unorganized construction workforce. The lesbians who have survived all that hazing and hostility could surely rise to such a crisis. They have already proven that they have the guts to stick it out when the going gets tough.

The author thanks Debra Bernhardt, Jon Bloom, Ileen Devault, Dana Frank, Jeff Grabelsky, Desma Holcomb, Colette Hyman, Jane Latour, and Paul Mishler for their careful readings of drafts of this essay.

Notes

1. Interview with Connie Ashbrook, 16 July 1995, Out in the Union Oral History Collection, 1995-2000, Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University (hereafter cited to as RFWLA).

2. Indeed, the number of lesbians and gay men in the US population as a whole remains a hotly debated issue, ranging from Alfred Kinsey's 1948 estimate of 10 percent, which includes a wide and life-long gamut of homosexual and bisexual behaviors, to the Alan Guttmacher Institute's 1999 estimate of 2 to 3 percent, based, like the Kinsey survey, on the questionable methods of sexual self-reporting.

3. Although I have also spoken with lesbians of color among the very small number of nonwhite women employed in construction, I have not succeeded in recording any interviews. My research is ongoing, and I am grateful for any new leads.

4. J. L. Rogers, "Lesbian Women in the Building Trades" (typescript in author's possession, 1990), p. 3.

5. Hardhatted Women of Cleveland, Oregon Tradeswomen, and several other local organizations continue to thrive and can be contacted on-line: www.hardhattedwomen.org; www.tradeswomen.net.

6. For an extensive discussion of policy, see S. Eisenberg, "Women Hard Hats Speak Out," The Nation, 18 September 1989, pp. 272-76.

7. M. Walshok, Blue Collar Women: Pioneers on the Male Frontier (New York: Doubleday, 1981), p. 40.

8. Interview with Karen Wheeler, 26 March 1995, RFWLA. Wheeler's story precedes the larger influx of women into the building trades after 1978. While the welding skills she acquired as an apprentice at the Quincy Shipyards are basic construction skills, the union she joined there, Shipbuilders Local 5, is not an affiliate of the AFL-CIO Building Trades Department.

9. On the passing of the trade from fathers to sons and other details of the masculine mystique see F. Moccio, "Contradicting Male Power and Privilege: Class, Race and Gender Relations in the Building Trades" (Ph.D. diss., New School, 1992), p. 280-81.

10. Interview with Nancy Brown, 1 May 1995, RFWLA.

11. Interview with Ashbrook, 16 July 1995.

12. See, for example, J. Schroedel, Alone in a Crowd: Women in the Trades Tell Their Stories (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); M. Martin, Hard-Hatted Women: Life on the Job (Seattle: Seal Press, 1997); S. Eisenberg, We'll Call You If We Need You: Experiences of Women Working Construction (Ithaca, Cornell ILR Press, 1998).

13. Moccio, "Contradicting Male Power" pp. 302-3.

14. E. Kadetsky, "Woman's Work," New York Newsday, 26 October 1992, pp. 52-53.

15. Personal communication, 29 October 1987.

16. A. Aberfoyle, "Letter," Trades-women (Fall/Winter 1987-1988): p. 3.

17. Interview with Ashbrook, 16 July 1995.

18. Interview with Wheeler, 26 March 1995. Several lesbians in the trades responded to the survey question "What are some lesbian issues that heterosexual women are uncomfortable discussing?" with "Being in the bathroom with them [lesbians]" as a specific fear. See Rogers, "Lesbian Women," p. 43.

19. Personal communication, 4 March 1999.

20. Interview with Brown, 1 May 1995.

21. Interview, 1 May 1995.

22. Interview, 26 March 1995.

23. Interview, 1 May 1995.

24. Interview, 26 March 1995.

25. Interview, 1 May 1995.

26. Personal communication, 4 March 1999.

27. Interview, 1 May 1995.

28. Interview, 16 July 1995.

29. Personal communication, 17 February 1999.

30. It is not at all unusual to see a very small proportion of eligible workers register for domestic partner benefits. Because so many workers typically do not take advantage of the benefit, it is actually an inexpensive reform. For more on collective bargaining of same-sex and opposite-sex domestic partner benefits, see D. Holcomb, "Domestic Partner Health Benefits: The Corporate Model vs. the Union Model," in Laboring for Rights: Unions and Sexual Diversity across Nations, ed. Gerald Hunt (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), pp. 103-120.

31. See, for example, Tradeswomen (1981-1999) This national quarterly advocated the rights of women in blue-collar jobs and ran features on women working in a wide variety of nontraditional jobs at both unionized and nonunion workplaces. Theme issues focused on women's health; mothering (pregnancy, child care, etc); parents as mentors; women of color, etc. In interview features, some individuals identified themselves as lesbians and criticized dyke-baiting, but overall in eighteen years of publication fewer than five articles made their main theme the lesbian presence in the trades.

Indexing (document details)

Subjects:	Construction industry, Feminism, Gays & lesbians, Industry, Labor force, Labor relations, Labor unions, Organizations
Author(s):	Frank, Miriam
Document types:	Feature
Publication title:	New Labor Forum. New York: Jun 30, 2001. , Iss. 8; pg. 25
Source type:	Periodical
ISSN:	10957960