

Against the grain

Pioneer female board carpenter fights for job — again

By JACK SCHIERENBECK

Ann Jochems admits she's no angel. That she showed bad judgment. That she lied and even falsified official documents.

Still, Jochems swears she's being railroaded; that the real crime is what was done to her over the last 16 years.

As a Board of Education school facilities carpenter and now supervisor, she dared to crack the father-and-son, testosterone-exploding building trades with its high-paying, generally unionized jobs. Tell your story walking, says the board, which wants to fire her.

The case against Jochems is this: Acting on an anonymous tip that she was not in her office during work hours, investigators from Special Investigations Commissioner Edward Stancik's office went looking for her. Sure enough, she wasn't where she was supposed to be.

On 10 occasions over a four-month period, investigators found the 51-year-old Jochems either in her car, sometimes reading a newspaper, or attending noonday meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Charged with a criminal-sounding "theft-of-services," Jochems is fighting to save her job.

Again? What else is new?

The Board of Education employs its own crafts people to do minor maintenance and repair of the schools — everything from fixing buckling floor tiles to replacing flaking plaster. As one of only two

women carpenters — out of 230 — who work for the board and the board's only female supervisor of any of the building trades, she's battled an old-boy's-club tradition of discrimination enforced by co-workers and endorsed by unions and bosses alike.

Of course, it didn't help that Jochems is an open lesbian — if heterosexuals could have photos of girlfriends on their desk, why couldn't she? — which rubbed many of her more culturally conservative colleagues the wrong way.

"From the beginning they've made her life a living hell," says a former male co-worker, who didn't want his name used. "It didn't matter that she knew her stuff. She was a woman and that was enough for them to abuse her. They do that to women, especially anyone who stands up and speaks out about what's right. They become a target."

Target is the right word. What else would you call it when, early on in her board career, a supervisor ordered her to make a dangerous cut of a 12-foot board with a table saw, knowing full well that safety called for the cut to be done by two people?

What else would you call it when a well-built male co-worker intentionally drove his shoulder into the 5-foot-7, 135-pound Jochems, almost dislocating her shoulder?

Or when workers in a Board of Ed van deliberately gunned the engine and swerved up onto the sidewalk? Just miss-

ing her, they drove off laughing.

Pretty funny, huh?

Sexual harassment? Walls of sexually explicit photos were just the titillating tip of a pervasive and pernicious male-locker-room gestalt. Add to it a constant stream of crude comments about women in general — "those [female genitalia] in the coffee truck" to more personal stuff — "Too bad you don't have any [breasts]" — to lurid speculation about her personal life. Even cruder was the conversation piece in the carpenters' shop: a giant carved penis placed in the middle of the coffee table that, Jochem heard, was dedicated to her.

As painful as all of this abuse was, it was the sheer isolation of the job that hurt Jochems the most. "Carpentry is, for the most part, a partner trade. But for years I had to work alone," she says in a voice cracking with emotion. She recalls how on school holidays, while all the other carpenters worked together, she was left alone all day in an empty school building. "They treated me like a leper," she says.

So what about her being out of the office, reading newspapers in her car, the so-called "theft of services?"

The answer is simple, said Jochems. Her office became so intolerable she took refuge in nearby diners and her car to do stacks of paperwork — and what's more, it was her boss' idea.

It's also true that sometimes she extended her 30-minute lunch break to attend noon meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. She admits to falsifying her daily itinerary sheets to show she was on company business during those meeting times. But Jochems maintains that she never neglected her duties and is being singled out for selective prosecution when male colleagues routinely take similar liberties.

"What?" she asks. "Am I the only supervisor who reads the paper or gets back late from lunch?" As for the lying about her whereabouts, she claims that "fudging" times is standard procedure and an open secret at the board's maintenance di-

Could this happen to you?

UFT members are protected from the type of sexual harassment suffered by the Board of Education carpenter reported about in Labor Days. The provision in the contract dealing with this issue can be found in Article 23 under "Special Complaints" on page 146. If you think you are a victim of similar abuse, consult your chapter leader about filing a grievance.

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Besides, says Jochems, whether the charges are trumped up or not, the punishment — losing her job — is way out of line with the crime. After all, she points out, two Board of Ed carpenters were discovered in 1997 to have padded their timesheets by 45 minutes on at least 49 occasions. Their punishment? A 30-day suspension without pay.

Jochems has already served her 30-day suspension — the first disciplinary action in her 16-year career at the board — and been banished as of last August to another office, where she no longer supervises any work crews.

The cruel irony in all of this is that before everything blew up, Ann Jochems — who already has an associate's degree in woodworking and is finishing a master's in labor relations — had taken and passed the very demanding supervisor of mechanics exam which would have made her eligible to supervise all the various building trades, not just carpenters. Among the many hundreds of supervisors who sat for the exam, Jochem was the only woman. Most failed; she scored near the top.

None of this seems to matter to the board, which at a Jan. 9 hearing stuck to its demand that Jochems be fired.

Another hearing is scheduled for March 4.