

## Interview With Irene Soloway

J. This is Jane Latour interviewing Irene Soloway on August 31, 1994. Irene, last time we talked was long about '90-'91 and so, a lot of things have happened since then. I'd like you to tell me about changes that you see in your Local, in terms of ... or in The Carpenters,--in the building trades, with women in the trades. Any observations about that?

I. Yeah, Jane. It's been years.

J. Yeah, I know.

I. I've seen ... I've been in the Carpenters Union since '79. It's now '94,--almost fifteen years,--and when I first came into the Union as a full grown adult woman apprentice, with other like-minded women and a diverse group of women, but most who had had experience in life before they came into the Carpenters Union,--we tried to inform the Carpenters Union of what we thought they needed to do to make the Union receptive to women and to ... to be inclusive. And we were, over a period of time, became aware of this process, that the Carpenters Union was not interested in fresh, new ideas coming from rank and file. We came in with ideas about having sexual harassment for the men in construction. We came in with ideas about having a Women's Committee that would address the issues of women in construction. We ... We actually came ... we came in with ideas about how the apprenticeship school could be more in touch with the apprentices around issues of ethnicity and race and issues ... And what we were always told was: We're all one Union and we're all brothers, and there's no need for these dif-- ... to point out these differences because we're all carpenters. And was ... It ... And so the specific issues for women were never addressed. And during that time,--but now almost fifteen years later,--they actually are being addressed, so that in terms of, yes, there is actually a Women's Committee now that's sanct-- ... It's not an official Committee of the Carpenters Union, but it's sanctioned to meet within the Carpenters school, and it's ... it's advertised in the Carpenters paper that there is such a Committee, and who the contact people are,--so there's, at least, an acknowledgement of this Committee. And there is specific training,--sexual harassment training,--for men, and being done by women who are Carpenters,--graduates of our school,--who are now teaching at the school,--which is an important part of the program. And there's ... And another ... one of our other ideas was about teaching labor history in the Carpenters school, which was then ignored, and now--you know--like history's being taught in the Carpenters school. And this is, like, over a period of fifteen years. So I see ... although the, specifically, the ... I ... the ... they're ... the Union and the apprenticeship in the Carpenters Union was now what I would consider sexist, they--we were never discriminated against within the school,--but the specific issues that were barriers to women were never addressed specifically. So it was a second hand

kind of,--difuse kind of way that sexism was expressed. Now, those issues are now being addressed ?? But also, we have women, who are journey level carpenters, who are now part of the school and the training, who are ... have been sought to take the role of teaching young ... younger apprentices,--which is very significant really. And we have women who are teaching at the school who are acknowledged as women, acknowledged as lesbians, and acknowledged as mothers, and as excellent carpenters. And they are actually role models for, not only other women, but for men, too. So I have to admit that that's ... From coming in as a rowdy gang of girls with big mouths and ideas,--not knowing very much about this industry at all,--to having people who ... women in the Union and in the school,--who are very savvy and are acknowledged for their skills ... I mean,--that's not ... I'm not trying to paint a rosy picture, but that actually exists. And that did not exist fifteen years ago. So there's encouragement there.

J. ??

I. See, I'm not ... I don't work on the Committee. I just know that it exists. I don't ... I can't speak on the specifics, 'cause I don't ... I'm not participating in it;--but that it exists, and that there ... That's ... That's ... That's all I know. You'll have to interview somebody else (laughs) to find out what actually happens there.

J. Well, we ... I remember, you talked about a building where there ... This was an important bank of something,

I. Oh!

J. And you said that there were like seven women ??

I. Well, since I'm working with the City, I don't really ... I'm not in ... actually in construction any more, but I did find out ... I .... Just the other day, when I was talking to women,--a group of women,--who were trying ... who ... who are in non-traditional ?? women's programs,--and there was a wom-- ... I was on a panel there, and there was a woman who was a ... probably in her twenties,--a young, black woman,--who had just gotten a first year apprentice job six weeks before at the federal ... at Federal Plaza--?? who talked about having weekly meetings with the other women who were working, for other contractors, at the court house job, and going out bowling, and having ... having that solidarity on the job. There were ... I don't know how many women exactly there were, but there were enough to have two bowling teams out of this one job,--which is obviously a federal job,--but that she ... But that was her first experience as a ... a first year apprentice carpenter, that she would come on to a job and have a ... a group of compadres there,--women who were in all trades,--who are ... organized themselves as ... as a support group, and talked through issues on the job. And,--you know--it's

... it's really great that she had that opportunity, as a first year apprentice. It's ... It's ... She ... She specifically said that she really,--you know,--it was like a real great thing to her that she could go out with the girls from the job. So that's--you know ... I was really pleased to hear that.

J. You had talked about this obstacle to women getting into Civil Service work because of that ??

I. ... five years of journey level experience,--yes;--yes.

J. ??

I. No. Also, I don't think ... I don't know for sure, but I .... my sense is that the numbers of women in the construction industry have not change significantly. I think it's ... I just have this very st--you know,--my gut feeling from my own observations, but not from the ... the Bureau Of Labor Statistics or anything, is that it's remained this constant small amount of women in the construction trades,--?? the only ...--but they haven't left the industry. We have not left the industry. We're still part of the industry, even though a minute ... a small part,--and that the women coming in now are generally younger;--sometimes it's their first jobs;--and they come in ... And what they say is that the men are more friendly to them;--that some of the barriers are ... are down;--that ... that the difficulty of maintaining a livelihood in the industry just still and are probably still hard harder for women than men. But these younger women that I've ... I've met fell a certain kind of confidence about ... about it. And I think the men have gotten used to us being a part of the industry. Many problems still exist, but it's ... the,--I mean,--the real pioneering days, I think, are ... are over, in terms of social barriers to women in construction, and that big monolithic kind of thing we experienced in the '70s.

J. You mentioned NEW, and I'm wondering, what's ... what's going on, in terms of women ?? you know,--with these support groups, such as NEW, what's ... sort of what's ??

I. I hope you're not making a direct transcript from this interview because there's a lot of things I really don't feel I can speak on with any expertise. I mean,--I'm ... I'm not involved in women ... in organizing in women in the trades, at this point. I know that ... I don't ... I don't really ... I don't really know that much about advocacy. I just know ... I know that there's the New York Tradeswomen group ... I don't,--you know,--which I can't really speak about. I know that NEW is doing job development in construction with a little bit of renewed vigor now. I know ... and for what reasons, I'm not sure. I'm ... And I'm not even sure this is official stuff where ... Can I stop the tape for a minute? (the tape is turned off and immediately on again.) So, you were talking about advocacy groups, and that's ...

J. So, you ... you were a pioneer and a leader with a really dynamic group ?? Do you ... Do you ... do you miss organizing in that way, like the kind of stuff you did with United Tradeswomen, or it's a fond memory?

I. (laughs) I ... I miss the ... I think it was really five years of my ... of my life that was really focused around construction and women in construction,--and it was great! I ... I have a lot of good memories. It was very creative. It was like a unique group, and it was just ... it was a great ... It was great! Socially, it was a really interesting mix of people, and politically, we were all ... We weren't overtly political, in the sense that we ... we were ... We still felt very much on the outside of the construction industry. It felt very kind of scary to us, but we ... we kind of created a cultural groups that ... that ... that supported ourselves and each other, that was able to ... to move forward into that industry. Now I think that women are more into the industry, so I think we did do something. I think we did, like, move ourselves inside,--from the outside to the inside,--by creating an identity for ourselves, as well as educating ourselves and each other, and trying to educate the Union about us. But that ... that was more ... less overtly ... You know,--I think our presence and our strong continued presence for each other and ourselves was the main accomplishment of this group. And ?? things now are more specific in various independent Unions. The electricians' women have their own stories to tell of them inside their own Union. Carpenter women,--sheet metal,--I don't know,--you know,--other ... It's hard ... It's hard to say. I would say electricians are ?? are the most invisible.

J. On the ... You've been working on ... as a Civil Service worker, doing a lot of organizing with shop stewards, and I wondered what you could say about changes that you've seen in the organizing climate on the job, and the response from Management and your coworkers and ... What's ...

I. Well, the main change in Civil Service carpenters issues is ... well, I don't know exactly how to describe it. We had been organizing for a long time to let out own Local to address--within the Carpenters Union,--to address the ... the ... the need of Civil Service workers and the ... the ... which is very different from outside construction. Working conditions are very different, and work issues are very different, and we had a certain amount of freedom that the workers on the outside didn't have, 'cause we had more or less permanent jobs and ... But what has happened is that one of our ... We ... We have ... We have gotten a response ... The response we've gotten from the Union and, indirectly from the International, was to put ... to get our own representative full-time,--which we only had part-time representation before,--from our own ranks. And so, this is a trial period now to see whether that works for us. Our ... Our ...

J. You were having meetings for a long time, and they seemed to be pretty successful, and you were getting a lot of participation and ... Do you think this is a legitimate, sincere effort on the part of the Union to respond, or is it ?? or ...

I. Yeah, I ... I ... God, I feel like going off.

J. So, to go back to the subject of on the job organizing and this move for a City Carpenter Local, now there's been an appointment of an individual. And so, what do you see as the ... the potential for that move?

I. Even though the move for--over five, six, seven years,--was to ... to have a Civil Service Local, self run,--and that's not what the result of the organizing effort was,--the results ... indirect results of the organizing effort was to have an appointment of one of our own rank and file spokespeople to be a full-time representative for Civil Service carpenters,--whereas in the past, it was ... we had part-time representation, and somebody who was more removed from the rank and file issues. So that's what we ... we ended up with is an appointment of one of our own rank and file, and one of our strongest and most courageous ?? for working people, who has now the responsibility,--full-time responsibility,--to ... to represent us, so that in .... in a sense,--even though it's not the outcome that e wanted,--out's an outcome that has, I think, the potential, and I think the people in ... in my Union,--the Civil Service carpenters in my Union,--fell, generally, pretty good about it, at this point: a fair person, and honest person,--somebody who's ... who's put himself on the line for ... since around 1984, who has went up against our own officials, and has appealed to the International, and has organized four or five hundred people at a ... at a clip, to sign petitions to press our ... So that's what we ... And now, he's part of ... Now, he's ... he's become our Union representative,--and I think the potential in there is that he understands and is closer to organizing, and is ... wants to put into effect a steward training program for Civil Service stewards, starting this fall, to ... to bring out the basic principles what ... of what stewards can be in this context, and to give us tools to work with in Civil Service law and in practice,--and to give us the opportunity to communicate with each other ... and compare notes, and possibly work with each other from agency to agency, to ... to get some kind of consistency within all these agencies which have been ... have very inconsistent labor practices for the same group of workers,--and tremendous ... tremendous compromising of ... of work rules and Union rules and principles. So ...

J. So you have a community of interest in New York City problems, so learn from each other, share and ...

I. Learn from each other, share and get skills and also ??--we're

talking about all the major City agencies--being ... maybe being able to link issues up, and to ser-- ... and to ... and to work as a lar--you know--larger body. I mean,--I can see this .... There are a lot of pretty smart carpenters who've been doing their own homework for years and have had, actually, to They have ... They have law suits,--successful law suits,--around uses that the Union has not chosen to represent them on, for one reason or another, and we can ... You know,--that information is power, from one agency to the other, precedents ... The precedents are there. We just never knew about the precedents. Now we can use these,--you know. If we get together on a lot of these, we can use the precedents from one agency and bring them to another agency. I can see it already in my own ag3ency, H.H.C. There was this law ... law suit,--in the last series of layoffs,--the Department Of General Services Carpenters had a law suit. They were laid off--what do you call it?--wrongly--wrongfully, and they ... they presented a law suit and got their jobs back with back wages. But now ?? in H.H.C. who are about to be laid off, are presenting this precedent to our labor relations, and our poten-- .. And now, our potential,--now that there's precedents and we have somebody in who's ... who came from our ranks,--now the opportunity may finally crack open that our own Union will represent us legally in this battle, so we don't have to go to private lawyers that we read in the back pages of The Chief, and call their numbers up;--that ... that ... that we're present-- ... Now we, as stewards, we would be able to get the precedents together of all these things that people have done on their own, and present them to the Union, and the Union ... we might be able to crack ... crack them open to give us the opportunity to be able to use their own resources,--which are our resources, really,--to be able to use them to fight the battles that need to be fought.

J. Instead of using all those Union lawyers to fight the indictments against the District,

I. Right,--to use them to ... to ... for our own working conditions and our own jobs.

J. Now, you mentioned lay offs, and what's ... what's the impact of Giuliani's threat to privatize a number of hospitals in the City,--and what's happening with the privatization issue and ??

I. Well, there's impending,--fairly large scale impending lay offs in the Health And Hospitals Corporation where I work. What's interesting that it's ... that ... that the lay offs are ... are not ... Privatization was the threat. The result of the threat was to reorganize Health and Hospitals Corporation,--now to privatize but to reorganize,--and what they're ... the catch words are now: Regionalization and ... which is decentralization. H.H.C. had a ... a central office, which was the ... the core executive brain and capital programs;--the construction and engineering brain, and central supplies,--which was the purchasing brain,--all of that,--for this

system which has fifteen hospitals and satellite clin-- ... plus satellite clinics. And what they're doing is they're dismantling the brain, and they're putting ... and ... and laying-off half,--which is six hundred people involved in this work in this central office unit. Six hundred are going to be laid off within a year.

J. So they're going to set everything up in a ... in a centralized unit, de--but decentralized region-- ... on a regional basis?

I. Regional ... Yeah. It's going to be ...

J. It seems like it's a duplication of ... It seems to me counter-intuitive, like it would create more ...

I. more bureaucracy.

J. Yeah.

I. Well, this ... The ... The idea, I think, start ... was to facilitate ... Regionalization had to ... was to facilitate keeping ... It was ... It was the medical continuum. I mean,--this is stuff that I'm certainly not an expert in, but it ... it ... I think it's ... I think it's, from their thinking, it's a dual thing. It partly is laying-off Civil Service workers and laying off--you know--managerial and Civil Service workers that they felt that they had ... were too expensive and hard to ... They didn't have managerial prerogative,--total managerial prerogative--over? So part of it is that, just, like, getting rid of bidies that are ... that have years and have pension plans, and that have years in the system, and ... and have vacation time, and all these benefits that came with working for the City. They can--you know--in a ... in a swoop,--get rid of them on the ... on the ... and at the same ... by this uni--creating this different system of units ... Civil Service-busting and Union-busting, in the sense that they can get rid of workers with a tremendous amount of seniority, without any repercussions.

J. And then, they're going to bring in a work force that's non-Union?

I. Well, then ... They don't really have a plan. They're going to give the prerogative to the Regional Directors. They want to make things ... I mean,--it's ... It's a ... It's a ... It's tricky, 'cause it's ... you're talking about ... We're talking about labor. We're talking about sys-- ... health care systems. It's ... It's a complicated thing, but from--you know,--just from our--from the point of view of ... of labor, what they ... what this reorganization is enabling them to do is to lay off a lot of workers with seniority and benefits, and possibly have a budget allotted to them which would enable them to hire temporary workers or contractors to do the work that was ... used to be done in house. This is just from the trades' point of view. There's a lot of aspects to this that I ... I'm not

... .. I ... I only have theories about. But the ... the real ...  
The ... The concrete example of some of the things that it could  
do to us is ... is have somebody who's been a carpenter, a carpenter  
supervisor and supervisor of mechanics,--who have ... who's worked  
for Health and Hospitals Corporation for somewhere around ten years,  
and has a lot of experience within the hospitals, and the hospital  
systems, and has a tremendous amount ... a specific fund of knowledge  
that has been gained,--can be laid off--you know--with ... with no  
repercussions. And what would be kept would be somebody with either  
temporary or with very little experience. So it's ... It's ...  
It's a total change of opportunity, when ... going to a ... I mean,--I  
know ... I worked with men who have made their careers, and they  
have sincerely catered their ... catered their training towards  
hospital work,--trade work,--who know a lot about high pressure  
equipment,--high pressure plumbing,--dealing with emergency  
technical equipment,--all kind ...--fire alarm systems would not--who  
are all going to be laid off,--who ... who,--when they came into the  
hospital system,--came in as a career, and who are now going to be  
out in the street. They don't have a plan for having this work be  
done. They just are going to be ... They're going to be losing,  
basically losing, commitment and train ... people who are ... who  
trained, who have experience. And I think the idea is that it would  
be the ... it would be the prerogative of the person in charge of  
the unit to either hire outside or hire temporary. It's ... It's  
... It's the political catch phrase,--you know. And we who have  
worked in the hospitals for, myself, nine years;--others less or  
more,--see independent contractors coming in with very little  
commitment to the ... the corporation and to the hospital system:  
come in, come out, do a bad job or a good job;--a lot of times it's  
a bad job;--change their name, move out of town. On paper it looks  
cheaper 'cause their bids come in cheaper, but in the long run, it  
probably is costing the tax payer a whole lot more money. Nobody's  
addressing this issue from ... on that level or any other level right  
now. So it's ... it's very threatening, and it's very undermining  
of ... of ... of what Civil Service is. And, to me, the best ...  
I mean,--to me, Civil Service is ... you can say it's a lot of different  
things, but I look at it in the best sense which is public works,--you  
know,--and commitment to public works, and commitment of the corpora--  
... of the public institution to the worker who ...--you know,--a  
mutual commitment to ... And,--I mean,--I think that's ... it's kind  
of a devastating thing to break that whole system down without having  
a better plan, and only just considering privatization as a sore of  
... some kind of panacea that anyone who looks into it knows it is  
not.

J. Now, I have two questions. One is: how ... how are the  
workers that ... that you're around, how are ... are people responding?  
Is there any political response? Is there any attempt to organize  
or, like, to arm people with information, and to form some kind of--

I. Um-um.



J. you know,--political response to this?

I. Yeah.

J. Or ... And do you see the Union at all playing a role in that?

I. It's ... It's very ... I don't see ... I see a lot of people-- ... It's ... It's ... Hopefully, we're going to have a political response. It's such a huge issue. The Unions in Civil Service are not used to dealing with these huge issues. They're used to dealing with, like, how can I get my kid braces? And it ... I can't say I see the Union taking this issue on politically. D.C. 37,--Stanley Hill's Union,--is taking it ...

#### Side Two

J. So the District Council of Carpenters has been undergoing a fair share of negotiating with the government, shall we say, or trials and ... So do you see any kind of--you know--any ... any difference in terms of the way people are relating to the Union, and ... and this idea that there's going to be a general election of members of the looters and ... What's happening?

I. Well, it's interesting because--I mean--try to bring up the subject on the job--you know--it's like ... It's ... It's a very, incredibly significant change in the Union, that we're going to have direct election of District Council officers. It's the first time in the history of the New York District Council ever we've had direct elections ... we will have the opportunity to have direct elections. This is like a phenomenal thing. It's like ... Basically, it's saying, we ... we're ... we have ... The rank and file has the say, and even ... and not the Business Agents, not the power elite. And I bring this up on the job all the time. It's like people don't quite get it, because the way ... They read the Union papers, and the way it's presented to them is like ... It's ... It's ... It's really down playing this ma-- ... major, significant change, and it's making it seem like business as usual, but we're just ... But at the same time, there's a certain amount of a forum that's happening, in order to keep people happy enough to not take advantage of voting power to get the incumbents out. And it's worked ... They're--you know--pretty good at this. I mean,--Carpenters don't have a history of ... of radicalism. They don't have a history of--you know ... There ... There is a history of rank and file movement, but it's a very small

J. ??

I. more. It's ver- ... It's been significant, but not ... but ... but through the ... through ... it's through the gadfly

system of the ... small percentage of the people that stay at it and get benefits. The benefit comes to the rank and file, but it's not perceived as being as a result of this rank and file gadfly movement.

It's perceived as coming from the top. And it's ... And ... And ... because it hasn't been a mass movement. So this is part of that,--I mean,--this whole ... this whole government intervention and opening up of ... of the election process to the rank and file really came from,--as far as I can see,--came from the ... the gadflies, and .. but they ... to the rank and file, it seems like it just sort of came from God, and that nobody sees real change as possible. We ... The vision isn't necessarily there. But meanwhile, there are reforms that are happening ... as a result, because we are being catered to right now. This is a grace period for us. In Civil Service, it's resulting in finally ... I mean,--its a ... it's a ... seems like a minor issues, but finally, issue of linkage of pension from the outside,--people who work on the outside and have, maybe, one or two credits short of getting ?? pension. If they go to take this City job which, supposedly, was more secure, they lost the entire pension contribution that they ever earned. Well, and so now, finally, this ... there's going to be a linkage, because we'd never left the Union, and we've never left the trade, but we've lost our ... our pensions, and where did that go. We ... We brought this up and brought this up, and now there's a linkage being made, and it's--you know--it's very ... It makes sense. It's our money. We should've ...you know. We've earned it. It was ... It was part of our ... our ... our pay Opackage, and ... so now there's--you know--it's being acknowledged that it's your money and you take it with you, if you move from one division outside to the other, Civil Service. So that's, like, that's a side ben-- ...you know;--that's ... that's a ... a pandering to the rank and file, so that we are ...--you know,--which is great. We want more. We want more of these ...

J. So, now, I have two questions: This new administrator, Convoy, do you see any ... any results of his work or is he ... Was ... Did ... is that filtered down to people on the job at all, or ... Or what's the reaction to him?

I. Yeah. See,--

J. Reaction to the government? Is there an anti-reaction or ...

I. I can't speak about the outside, 'cause I've been ... I'm in the City for ni--for nine years. In the City, people don't ... aren't even really that aware of it. They don't ... They don't ... They ... They haven't figured it out that there's this independent Cou--you know,--there's this independent auditor of the Carpenters Union that ...

J. How can they not figure it out?

I. They ... They ... They ... They just figure there's the bunch of crooks and they sort of got out of going to jail or something like that. (laughs)

J. Well, it's interesting that the settlement,--the agreement allows for Pascal McGuinness cannot run his home Local, 608, but he can be President of the International. This is the part that I can't figure out. I'm ... I'm having trouble understanding this.

I. Well, the ... the Carpenter would ... would say, well,--you know--they're all crooks. What ... What else is new? I mean,--the vision isn't there like it is ... like it was even for the Teamsters in electing ... in having direct elections and being able to elect a real reform candidate. The vision isn't there for the Carpenters of having a real reform candidate, and getting that person in. So ...

J. Yeah. So, let's see,--what ... what ... what would be a fruitful area to ??

I. (laughs) This interview is really ... meanders. It's just ...

J. So the election, you don't see as being a major event in the Civil Service world, in terms of the District Council?

I. Well, I just see ... I see it has benefited us indir-- ... in ... in certain ways in getting our own person in,--getting a full-time rep. I think we're going to get ... We're getting lin-- ... pension linkage, and we're get--I think we're going to be getting stewards training. I think we're going to have regular meetings. A lot of the things that we've been putting out as our demands, are now ... look like they're going to be met. There was something else to ...

J. So these regular meetings will be ...

I. Will be at the Dis-- ... Yeah, we've ... We've ... We've been fighting for so many years for simply being able to have regular meetings,--official regular meetings of Civil Service Carpenters on a schedule, so that we ... We've been having them maybe ... extremely erratically and not--you know--not really productively. And ... And I think now we're going to be, how, having our own person in, he has a commitment to having regular meetings, having stewards training, giving us access to the Union lawyers, getting our--things like getting our ... our Union work cards on time. Things that are important to people that we, like, just never ... So there are direct-- ... indirectly a benefit of ... of the ... of the

J. Reform

I. reform process, because they're trying ... they're trying to get support;--to have the sup-- ... to have ... to ?? And, unfortunately, the Carpenters don't necessarily see it as ... as themselves being empowered.

J. What ... What would it take for them to see ... to piece it together and see that ...

I. I think that now people ... I think you're going to have ... I think ... I think it's going to be ... I think you're going to see more people running,--rank and file people running for office. I think there's gonna' be ... There's going to be an opposition to divine ... a rank and filer is going to run. He's probably not going to do great, but it's going to be ... I think that it's ... it's ... it's just a crack that's gonna' be opened, and I think that it ... it could be opened wider. It depends on how many of us are ... get out there.

J. I noticed that this issue of Hard Hat News,--which you, in the past, have done a lot of work on,--that there were actually letters with real names attached. I'm assuming those are real ... real names,

I. (laughs)

J. Not Brook Shields.

I. Right.

J. And so what ... And also, there was a ... an editorial that was encouraging Carpenters to actually stand up and run. What ... What do you think is the ... Do ... Do people actually see Hard Hat News, and is there a potential to use Hard Hat News as a wedge in this process of organizing, do you think? I mean,--do people relate ... respond well to it, when they ...

I. I ... I ... Oh, I've always thought people responded really well to Hard Hat News. First of all, they just take it, and it's like" this is for--you know,--this is about us.

J. Um-hum.

I. I think ... I think it has that potential. I really do. I think it needs to be a little bit more populist ... populist.

J. Um-hum.

I. I think it needs to be a little flashier;--have more dirt and more ...

J. Yeah. I've been arguing for a gossip column.

I. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I think it needs ... And I think it needs to be a little less polemical, and ... But I think ... I think ... I mean,--every time I've ever brought Hard Hat News onto a job, people just glom onto it. They ... I don't know if they always find what they want, but they just assume: this is for me,

J. Um-hum.

I. and this has information I need.

J. Um-hum.

I. And they're pretty starved for it.

J. What do you think about Hard Hat News sponsoring forums, like,--you know,--on the different ... Like, have a forum about the Carpenters, or have a forum about what's going on with the I. Or have a forum on corruption in the building trades, or--you know,--the role of the government in the ...

I. I think ... I think it's a great idea to have forums. I think having a forum on corruption in the building trades won't ... will ... will attract the--you know,--the ... the radical fringe that we know. I think having forums that have to do ... or that have a ... that have to do with the industry in a more general way, that ... that ... of ... could do good. I think that having ... having forums that ... that cater to the left wing of the ... of the trades,--which is tiny,--won't work. But I think that having forums that have to do with the industry itself,--and, like, have a ... a plethora of material about the industry,--you know--that ??

J. What kind of material?

I. I have to think about that. I mean,--I think there's ...

J. I think ... I think that this is ... I think that, with the changes that are taking place now, I think the ??

I. Yeah, economics would be a big part of it,

J. Uh-huh. Yeah.

I. And I think that where ... that the boom and bust cycle of the ... of the industry, and now that, like,--you know--and is that ... does that end up leveling or what ...--job future kinds of things

J. Um-hum.

I. ... would attract a lot of people, and would ... You know,--our industry is,--you know--it's just so directly related to

the economy and the real estate industry. I think those kinds of things would ... People ... People ... You know,--to have some kind ...--you know,--to ... to ... to analyze would attract people ... more people than idea ... an ... an analysis of corruption, 'cause corruption's just ... People mostly see it as a given,

J. Yeah.

I. and it ... I think it would take something else to have people see it as more than a given, that see it--the people that see it as a drain on the industry.

J. I just ... I'm interested in the ... the ... the ways to really tap into the questions that are important and relevant for building trades workers that would connect and ... And so, I think, ... I think it's a fruitful area to think about. I mean,--'cause this is, it seems to me, a dynamic time for the buildings trades.

I. Um-hum.

J. And so I think that,--you know--to get people who have a history of organizing,

I. Oh absolutely;--absolutely!

J. But to do it in a way, like you say, that's populist and relevant, and something will--you know--connect with the average rank and file ...

J. Right. Most people ... See,--it's like ... Look at all the people that came out to that City Hall rally for jobs.

J. Right.

I. That was not a radical event, but it was an ... it was ...

J. It was a dimensional ...

I. Could have been. (laughs)

J. Right. And the other thing is ... I mean,--'cause if there was some analysis there, would have

I. Right. Right. Right.

J. cut through the bullshit.

I. Unfortunately ... Yeah. Right, analysis.

J. Yeah, ?? a speech about it. Right.

I. Well, we ... we tried to do that in Hard Hat News, to say who was steering this ... this rally ad for what means. I mean,--the fact that there was this huge rally where people, like, could have closed down the City. And then, there was nothing after that.

J. Right. Well, there's ... there's a lot to be said ... And what about the question of what gets built, and who decides.

I. Right.

J. And the whole ... And here we have a housing starts industry that's stopped. And yet, we need housing, and where's the money going,

I. Right. Right. Right.

J. And why don't the developers develop when,--you know ... So all of these questions, I think, are,--you know. But to have an analysis, rather than just a narrative, or just--you know--some Union leader saying, We're going to get jobs,--you know.

I. Right. Right. Right.

J. We're going to elect Mario Cuomo and,--you know? So, I see that, looking through your United Tradeswomen fliers, and all of the work that you did, in terms of analyzing what the law was, and what your rights were under the law,

I. Um-hum. Um-hum.

J. and what wasn't being met, and trying to hold those people to a standard,

I. Um-hum. Um-hum.

J. It was a tremendous amount of work.

I. Um-hum.

J. That's the kind of thing that I think--you know--is crying to be done now, in terms of the building trades. Glad to see you're interested still. Okay. So that's basically it. I only have one more question,

I. Oh, okay.

J. Which is about staying power. And here you are, and you're still working as a carpenter,

I. Oh God, all these years!

J. And you're still involved in the Union,

I. Right. It's true.

J. And you're about to celebrate a birthday and ...

I. I'm not going to put that on tape.

J. And not going to put that on tape, just the birthday;--

I. (laughs)

J. And so I'm wondering, how are you finding your sources of support, and how are you keeping on keeping on.

I. Hmm. Well, I'm not sure I am, but ... I mean,--basically, I think I'm kind of in a lull right now in my ... in my ... I still am in the industry. I still ... I made it ... I think making a decent living is, like, a big part of staying power.

J. Um-hum.

I. I mean ... You know,--there's still ... There's a certain amount of job satisfaction in being a carpenter. That's been part of my staying power. Relating to this ... this ... You know,--being part of a large, important industry in New York City, and knowing hundreds and hundreds of people in this industry ... I mean,--this may seem really corny, but there is a certain ... Even though the brotherhood isn't the brotherhood you want it to be, it's still ... there's still a ... there still is a concept of--quote, unquote,--"brotherhood," in terms of--you know--seeing ... You s-- ... I mean,--this is a little corny, but--you know--you see people ... You go on the subway and you see all these guys who have sheet rock dust on their shoes,

J. ?? Uh-huh.

I. and--you know,--and their--you know--Daily News, and--you know--and a ... and a ... and a cooler, and you just--you know--they're you and you're them, and you're--you know--you know each other. You don't have to know each other's names,--you know. You know, ... I don't know. (laughs)

J. You feel part of it.

I. Yeah, exactly.

J. Yeah. Yeah. Well, ...

I. I mean,--I don't feel isolated.

J. Um-hum. Yeah.



I. Being in this industry, you're not ... never isolated, 'cause you get on the subway at eight o'clock in the morning, and you're--you know--you ... you read peoples' shoes,--you know? (laughs)

J. Right. Yeah. I do that, too. And I look for their bags of tools.

I. Yeah. And you know what their lives are like, and you know they know what your life is like.

J. Um-hum.

I. To a certain degree, as a woman--you know--they're not sure, but you know what their lives are like. And ... And it's--you know--it's a dangerous but exciting occupation. I think that's what . And it ... And it ... And it could be better.

J. Um-hum.

I. But I admire ... I have to say, I admire a lot of things about the people that I work with. I've learned a lot being in construction, and my community is ... is enormous. (laughs)

J. You mentioned there's some danger. And I'm ... You were so involved in the health and safety issue, and I'm wondering if ... Well, you said ... Like the privatization issue is ... is key now and ... and foremost.

I. Um-hum. Um-hum.

J. But are you still involved in ... in health and safety?

I. ... health and safety?

J. Are there any issues that rise up, in terms of your ...

I. Yeah, I think ... I think we got ... we got to a higher standard around the asbestos issue, from when I ... when this first started doing fire code violation work in ... in the hospital system, and opening up ceilings and having asbestos fall down on your head. I know my ... my ... my shop has ... I can't say it's perfect, but there's, like, a very ... There's a much more informed and alert way of dealing with asbestos now, where nobody works with asbestos when--you know ... Ff it's ... If it's perceived, the job stops. A crew comes in, cleans it up. I mean ...

J. That's a big victory.

I. Yeah. They not always clean it up the way that you'd want them to, but it's like, there's no more pushing people to do it,--just

do it. People are pretty aware about asbestos,

J. ??

I. and the ... the shop has ... With some exceptions there, there is a ... there ... the ... there ... there is a standard, which is: you don't endanger yourself with asbestos.

J. Um-hum.

I. You don't endanger yourself with ... with ... with anything. And it's ... And it's ... There's a ... And we've ... we've stopped so many jobs. And we go into hospitals, sometimes, where people work with asbestos. They don't say anything. Other ... And we go in, and we say, like, do a test, and then we'll work here. And they have to do it. And so,--you know--I feel like our ... what we ... the work that we did around that has paid off, to a certain ...

J. Um-hum.

I. to a certain extent.

J. Did you ever get ?? training?

I. We did.

J. You did.

I. We got ... We got it.

J. Great. Was it good?

I. I mean,--we still get it regularly.

J. Uh-huh.

I. You know,--as those things go, it was--you know,--it was good.

J. Uh-huh.

I. I mean,--I think it ... it made it official;--put the official stamp on that you don't work with certain things, and you only work--you know--the respirators and ... and the chemicals. I think ... I think it made a difference.

J. Um-hum.

I. You know,--those things are generally pretty boring, but I think it gives the official stamp to--you know--to your rights.

J. And you ... Yeah. You think it was not, like, an exercise in ...

I. Yeah, I think ... I think it was good. I feel like ... I feel like ... I feel like we got pretty far on that.

J. You haven't said very much about being a steward. You still a steward? You're still ... in the ...

I. Yeah, I'm still the steward,--yeah,--for my shop.

J. Have you been ... I mean,--there hasn't been another election, or you were reelected, or what's ...

I. There hasn't been another election. I mean,--I think I suffered a little bit from the long term-itis of not having a ... not have any opposition but ...

J. An opponent, yeah.

I. An opponent,--you know.

J. Um-hum.

I. You get really ... You get really ... You do tent to get slack. I mean,--I sort of ... I ... You know,--I would encourage an opponent.

J. Um-hum. Um-hum. Are you trying to train any people that come behind you and take up the burden and ...

I. Well, there ... there are people that I peak to who help ...

J. Uh-huh. But are you trying to develop leadership in the ...

I. I guess I can't say I have made ... I have done a lot on ... on that right now. I mean,--right now we're sort of fighting for our own ... It's ... We're trying to find a ... a foothold ... How to ... how to conduct this fight that we have ahead of us takes ... I mean,--I know I ... I encourage people to ... to talk to me and to directly talk to the Union. We're all ... I think we're ... we are involved in a kind of chaotic

J. Yeah.

I. group struggle right now,

J. Um-hum.

I. where everybody is ... We need all the hands we can get.

J. Um-hum.

I. People ... People have sent me, like, their ideas of how this can be fought. What ... You know,--everybody's ... everybody's working on this ... this lay off right now, so ...

J. Are ... Are you still enjoying being a steward? Do you ... I mean,--how ... What's ... What's your feelings on that?

I. I ... I actually I'm looking forward to steward training as a fresh start. And so that ... I sort of,--you know--I'm in a lull now, but I feel like there's ... the structure's gonna' ... is changing, to a certain degree. We have more reception in the District Council now. There's a ... and there's this commitment, and I feel like I need ... I need ... I need the--you know--I need that encouragement now and that push from outside myself, and I feel like we can get a second wind on being a steward, and ... change ... What I'm excited about now is changing the structure of being a steward within the City system,

J. Yeah.

I. which ... It's been so unstructured than ... that it ... and really, and just ... The ... The system was set up to discourage activism, and it has worked on me to a certain degree, dealing, like, mostly with emergencies.

J. Um-hum.

I. But since I worked pretty hard to get to a point where we would have ... I mean,--for five years, what I've been saying with a lot of the other stewards is we need a different structure. We need training. We need information. We need--you know--we need meetings. We need ... We need each other bla, bla, bla, and I think we're going into that phase which will be good. It will be good for me, personally. I think it would be--you know--it will be good for other-- ... for ... for ... for the whole ... for the whole picture.

J. Um-hum.

I. And then, I also look forward to a time where there .... You know,--I ... I ... I think I would ... I think I have been a steward. I don't need to be a steward for ... forever. I think it is ... I think what ... the point you brought up about having somebody else come ... come behind is ... is an important one.

J. In ... In England, they have this movement of, like, steward's councils, where the stewards,--you know.

I. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

J. It seems like it's something that--you know--we're so far away from, but--you know--??

I. Right. Well, that's a thing ... That's an idea of the, also, the TDU was, like, the stewards are the power in the Union.

J. Yeah. Uh-huh. Yeah.

I. They're ... They're the first ... the first ...

J. First line of defense.

I. First line of defense, and like, the most important one.

J. And offense, right.

I. Yeah. I ... I agree with that completely, and that's what-- ... that's part of my ... my looking forward to this stewards training, It's like ...

J. The connections.

I. ... the connection. Right.

J. And also the ... it seems like a lot of energy will come out of it, and other--you know--the ideal ...

I. Oh, absolutely! I see ... I see ... I mean,--it's like--you know--now it's August,--you know. I see September as, like, a ... a new starting point for ... for all the stewards in the City.

J. Okay. So anything you want to add, in terms of advice?

I. No. (laughs)

J. Okay.

I. I need advice.

J. Thanks for your ...

I. Okay. (the recorder is turned off and then on again)

I. Okay.

J. So advice. What ... What words do you have for ...

I. I think ... I think over the period that I've been

semi-activist, it's like ... it's just that--you know--it's not always ... you're not always going forward;--that ... that sometimes there are lulls, and you just can maintain momen----you know,--maintain equilibrium, and then,--you know--go for those little crests. And ...

J. Um-hum.

I. that I ... you need the stamina to do that.