

**Interview With Janine Blackwelder**  
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**By Jane Latour**

J.B. So a friend or somebody told me that the union was open for applications and so I went and I applied. And I took a series of tests and found out that I was in fact the first woman to enter the union. I've been an ironworker for over ten years. I was the first female ironworker in the local.

J.L. So identify yourself:

A. Okay. I'm an ironworker in building construction and I got into this business a little over ten years ago. I found out through the application and testing process that I was the first woman to come into this particular union. And I think that that has some bearing on my experience. But I think my experience over time also is similar to other women's as well as men who were there before me or who are yet to come.

J.L. You've been in that union for ten years--a little over ten years? How many other women are in there now?

A. I actually don't know. I've met some women and know that they tried it and have left for one reason for another. I've met other women who are still with the union. And, you know, I really have not made a count. I would say ... just a guess would be twelve.

J.L. How did you get into the union?

J.B. I heard about the fact that applications were being given out through a friend or someone. I don't remember. And I went and received an application. And then there were a series of tests which were state supervised. And eventually the local called me into their apprenticeship class. And sometime after that I got my first job. And at that time I quit the job I had to start working as an apprentice ironworker.

J.L. What made you think you wanted to be an ironworker?

J.B. The idea of working with my hands and working in building construction...I was attracted to that idea because it's something you can do and you can see the result of what you did and show your friends: Look! This is what I did. I mean, there was a certain element of that that drew me to it. Also, the pay sounded good, although I took a pay cut from my previous job to start as an apprentice, eventually the pay got better and I was looking at the pay, the benefits, the fact that I would have weekends off, the potential for overtime. It all looked pretty rosy. I mean, that hasn't exactly been my experience throughout

all this time, but it looked like a good move economically. Also, for some reason, I have reasons that I'm not attracted or I wasn't attracted to going into business or other types of occupations. I thought there was something kind of noble to be productive and--you know--instead of just passing papers in an office. And I feel claustrophobic in an office.

J.L. Did you think of yourself as a pioneer?

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

J.L. Yes.

J.B. You know? I've been friends with some of the guys. Some of the guys, in the very beginning, were very threatened by me; gave me a hard time.

J.L. Well, let's start with your apprentice experience. When you went into the apprentice program you were the only woman in the Apprentice Program?

J.B. Right.

J.L. And what was the reaction by the teachers and the other students?

J.B. Well, the first year teachers ... one guy was kind of old fashioned and one guy was a little more today. I think it was kind of new to them, funny to them. You know, a lot of these guys are the type of guys who talk one way among men and then find a need to change their language or possibly even their thoughts when a woman's present, and I think that was a source of discomfort for some of the guys. It's really--you know--individual to individual.

J.L. When you went out on the job, what was your experience as an apprentice? What were you doing? What was your first job? Can you remember?

J.B. Yeah. Oh, I remember perfectly well. I remember looking for the shanty. I remember the first ironworker I met. I remember the first loud mouth and (one) guy who was very insulting. I remember the first guy who was really nice and kind of took me under his wing to some extent and taught me things, and also just allowed me to learn and was willing to work with me without any ... you know, he didn't feel the need to romance me. He didn't feel the need to make me his daughter. We just worked as co-workers. He was actually a foreman and I was an apprentice, but I felt like I was being treated as an adult. I was an adult when I came into the local and a lot of the union building construction and union experience is to treat apprentices as kids or punks and this has been very difficult for women and minorities who have come in as adults, taking a role that sometimes was usually done by a young man and didn't, at that stage in his life, command a lot of respect from the other guys on the job. But as I say, I found myself with a foreman that was a good guy. And so to the extent that there were a few who were more hostile, my experience was generally positive the first year or two and pretty much throughout my apprenticeship. It gets more difficult sometimes when you become a mechanic and then you have to be a lot more competitive and kind of fend for yourself more than as an apprentice.

J.L. You were doing structural ironwork, not ornamental?

J.B. No. I was doing ornamental ironwork and still, for the most part, do. Once in a while we do structural ironwork.

J.L. Were you trained in both?

J.B. No. I was trained in what we call finishing work and ornamental ironwork. Finishing work can be something like entrance- ways and hanging doors and that type of thing, and some of the miscellaneous steel is not seen once it's erected because other things cover it. It's not ornamental ironwork like fancy gates outside of a brownstone. It's usually on a bigger scale. And one of the big items the ornamental ironworker does in New York is put up curtain wall, which is the metal that holds the glass. In most of the country ...

J.L. The skyscrapers.

J.B. Right. In most of the country there's not a separate Ornamental Local, and I realize that right here I have absolutely given away who I am without giving my name because New York is one of the two cities in the country that has an Ornamental Local and I am clearly the first woman in that Local. So one plus one equals two. (Laughs)

J.L. So now that we know who you are, let me ask you about the experience of the union. Did the union do anything to welcome

you as the first woman to enter the local or how did the union respond to your presence?

J.B. No. There was no fanfare or anything like that.

J.L. Did they have a gun put to their head? Did they have a court order that they were honoring?

J.B. The union was under a consent judgment to hire minority workers, meaning I guess Black and Hispanic and other ethnic men. I don't remember in that consent judgment anything mentioned about women. But at different times throughout these years I think there's been some pressure put on certain jobs to have a representation of women there. I don't really know to what extent that's been done. I haven't felt that it's been any kind of feather in my cap that I'm a woman; that that means I'm going to be more steadily employed than a man or anything like that because if I've been hired or kept on a job because I am a woman it's been kept from me. I think one or two jobs I was given that impression; that I was there because they want to show a woman. My contractor wanted to have a woman on his payroll.

J.L. Was this a federally funded job?

J.B. Either because of their funding or their subsidies or their tax breaks or ... I don't really know. I'm not well versed in ... And frankly, when you get on the job you're so busy finding out what to do and who to take orders from and where's the bathroom and all this other business that you don't spend time even investigating who the owner of the building is, much less who the financiers are. You know?

J.L. So how many people do you usually work with? What's a crew like?

J.B. Depending on the type of work it could be me and one other person to a job where the employer I work for has forty to sixty ironworkers on the job. It depends on the scale of the job. And also very much it depends on the type of work. I mean, clearly if it only takes one or two people to do something, your boss is not going to put five there.

J.L. So is the work heavy? Describe the work at a job site?

J.B. It can be heavy. We unload our material from trucks. We have to move it throughout the property or in the building or up the building or in various ways. Sometimes there's dollies or it could even be a crane to help distribute the material around the floor. But depending on what you're putting up, sometimes you just have to do it all with muscle. And if you find yourself on a job where the work is very heavy it's not the thing to do to just say: Well, there's a machine that can do this, because you're there as an apprentice or a fairly new person. You've just started

the job. It's not your role to decide what equipment is to be used. It's the role of either the employer or the foreman or the superintendent, in other words, somebody who's running the job. So when I first got into the trade I looked around to see to what extent that lighter work existed. And certainly there are some little jobs that anybody of any physique can do. But there's no guarantee that you're going to be on that job. And then, as you get further into it, you realize that because certain people are steady with that company or because of their experience or because of who they know, they might kind of have some of the lighter jobs sewed up, or some of the more lucrative jobs sewed up. And when you're unemployed and hustling to get the next job and you're in a position that you'll take anything that comes along, and you have to, and you should ... You know, if you're an ironworker, you should be prepared to take any type of job, especially in the beginning, after you've received at least some training. You learn on the job as well as in the apprentice school, but you find out that you have to be in very good shape or your body's going to suffer from it.

J.L. A lot of the women that I've talked to have difficulty getting the training that they need to get. What was your experience? Did it vary?

J.B. It definitely varied. Some people you work with, they're not going to really show you anything. You strictly have to watch. They're not teachers. They don't have the skill of being teachers. Some people explain things better than others. You can't go there and necessarily expect that your foreman or the mechanic you're working with is going to break everything down in terms you understand and kind of teach you in the same way that instruction is given in the school. On the other hand, sometimes you'll run into somebody who will share information with you. It's easy and you may learn more quickly or you may learn different types of things than you did by just watching.

J.L. Were you ever in the situation where you were feeling a lot of frustration about not being able to be trained and how did you handle it?

J.B. Well, on and off, I'm in a situation where I felt there was something to learn on the job and I've felt that people were kind of keeping their information to themselves. Sometimes it's through getting to know the guys and being friendly. That's one way to resolve it. They may share information with you.

Otherwise, just forget about it until you hit the next job. You just do what you're told and you just have to learn that it's not a constant uphill progression of ... I'm going to learn so much each year or each month or each day. Sometimes you're on a job that is very monotonous and your part of the job is a dummy job. And all you do is that every day and you just enjoy it ... You try to just enjoy the fact that you don't have the pressure and the mind work to do, until the next job, which, hopefully, if you're interested

in taking more responsibility, somebody will see that or see your skills and give a more interesting or challenging job. Again, there is no guarantee on any of this. And I have felt frustrated where I would have liked to have had the responsibility of the foreman and run the job. But again, so much is connections, who you know, what your reputation is ... and you don't know if employers know about you or not. And you're oftentimes with a completely new set of people and you have to start again kind of feeling your way, getting to know them and what they expect of you. And you kind of have to repeat being an apprentice, not quite to the same extent of an apprentice, but you have to kind of start over with people quite a bit, prove yourself and that type of thing.

J.L. How long does your average job last or is there no average?

J.B. Let's say it has ranged from a week to two years.

J.L. How long did the apprentice program last?

J.B. Three years.

J.L. Three years. And so what was your experience in the classroom? Did you find that you could really apply what you learned? Was it really theoretical and removed from what you were doing or was it a good experience? Did you learn a lot in the classroom?

J.B. Well, I think I learned things. I think in the amount of time that was spent in the classroom more could have been taught. I think the program has gotten better possibly through the years. Some teachers have gotten better, I think, since the time I was there. So I don't want to say that -- they're not totally stagnant throughout the years.

J.L. I'd like to talk now about your experience with the union. What was your experience with the union? Did you have any background about unions? How did you come to the union? What did you think of unions when you got there?

J.B. Well, I have a very positive attitude. I had at that time and still do, a very positive attitude about unions. In fact, I'm kind of an idealist in a way.

J.L. Where did that come from?

J.B. Where did that come from? Some reading, learning a little about the history of this country, seeing how in other countries the establishment of labor unions generally means an opening of democracy in a country that may be going from a less democratic type society, labor unions are generally an indication that people at large are having more of a say. Even before I took

any non-traditional job, I was a clerk/typist at a publishing house and there was no union there, and I saw the need for a union and I was instrumental in getting together with some other people and bringing about an organizing drive that District 65 got going.

J.L. Was it successful, actually?

J.B. Actually, to find out, I've had to communicate with people after I was no longer in the job. Unfortunately, their organizing job I don't think was very successful. I think the publishing industry spent a lot of money to keep unions out and a lot of money to try to satisfy employees and show that there is no need for a union. So I'm not really sure how things are now, but I have a feeling that maybe one or two publishing houses are organized and most are not.

J.L. Did you grow up in a union household?

J.B. No and yes. My mother was a telephone operator on and off.

J. So she was in the independent union prior to the CWA?

J.B. I'm not exactly sure. Actually, I was kind of small and don't really remember what the story is. I know that telephone operators are in a union. I'm just presuming that she was. (Laughs)

J.L. Right. My mother was a telephone operator too.

J.B. I'm just presuming she was in a union.

J.L. Yes.

J.B. But my father, when I was growing up, was a salesman and so he wasn't in a unionized type of job. But as far as being a craftsperson or a tradesperson, my parents have always had a lot of respect for people who have skills and my father used to do whatever fixing around the house that was needed.

J.L. Did he ever show you how to do anything?

J.B. Yeah. And I used to work with him sometimes. My brothers, for whatever reason, kind of shunned working with their hands. So I was the next one in line and I'd be his little assistant when I was small.

J.L. So you were the beneficiary?

J.B. Yes, to some extent. Right. As I got a little older I lost interest and it was only until I was already a couple of years in the business that I'm in now when I realized that I was more familiar than I thought I was. I came into it thinking I knew

nothing about construction or building or anything, and then I realized that since my father was in a construction--he was a salesman but with a construction-related product. So in other words, I realized that a lot of conversations I had heard over the years, places he had taken me and work we had done around the house, some of that information came in handy in the job.

J.L. When you started in the union, were you going to union meetings? You really had to go as an apprentice, didn't you?

J.B. No, not in our local. You know, maybe an individual teacher might encourage it, but we weren't ever given a little pamphlet like "You and the Union." You know? We were in school. We were in Apprentice and Trainee School and in our classes we were from the young to fifty year old apprentices and trainees. Trainee is a classification for the minority worker, which I think our union has now done away with. I felt that it had a little bit of a taboo attached to it, considering the local through the years has been a father and son situation and dominated by one ethnic group.

What was the question again?

J.L. The question was, did you start going to union meetings as an apprentice?

J.B. Oh, right. Yes, because I feel unions are important.

J.L. So describe the union meeting for me.

J.B. The union meetings I went to I found out very quickly that apprentices are not allowed to speak because I raised my hand purely for a question and I was told I was out of order. And that's how it is with our local. You do not participate in a union meeting as an apprentice. Well, at the time, I don't even think trainees were supposed to come because they didn't pay part of their union dues or some nonsense about becoming a trainee.

J.L. But you went to union meetings anyway?

J.B. I would go and I would listen and see that my ideals of democracy were not reflected in those meetings.

J.L. Were they well attended, in the local?

J.B. They were not especially well attended. The union meeting seemed to be a lot a clearinghouse of job information where people get together and say: Are you working? Where are you working? Do they need anybody? I'm looking for a job. My brother's looking for a job. You try to talk to people and convince them that they should hire you. Maybe you'll find out that the guy doesn't even have the power to hire anybody. But it's like a schmooze session. The actual formal meetings, the officials are listened to by some people. It's difficult to keep order in



the meetings, to keep people quiet. You know? We have a Sergeant-at-Arms to walk around and tell everybody to shut up and some do and some don't. And when people speak they're not always respected. I mean, this is certainly not the floor of the British Parliament or something. Anything can happen. You can be called out of order, booed down. To the extent that Robert's Rules are used, you often find they're used just to shut up an opinion that somebody doesn't feel comfortable hearing. So I've told people that I feel that some of us have seen more democracy at a Girl Scout meeting than in the union meeting. I wonder who that might be. (Both laugh)

J.L. So as a journey level worker and union member have you gotten up on the floor to speak at union meetings?

A. (with rising inflection) Yes! What have I spoken about? Sometimes it's just to ask a question to find out if so-and-so employer is signed up with the local because I was thinking of trying to get a job with that employer. Of course, I want to be sure that that employer pays union wages and benefits.

#### Side Two

J.L. Aside from going to union meetings, how did you find the union on the job? Did they act like a union? Did you know that there was a union?

J.B. Some guys gave me the impression that their sense of unionism is trying to do the least amount of work possible and still be successful in getting a paycheck. I mean, that is maybe an extreme case, although I've met several individuals who ... that's been the impression I've gotten from them. I think they themselves vary from job to job. Depending on the management, depending on the time pressures, depending on the type of work they'll either work harder or not. And then I have met quite a few people who are proud of their work, who look at their own work with a critical eye and get involved with everybody else on the job to try to get the best work done. So those are the two extremes. I mean, in defense of unionism, I feel that to the extent that there is employer and union sponsored training programs and many members who do take an interest in doing their job properly, I think it beats hiring people off the street or people who don't have the same amount of experience as a union worker might have.

J.L. So what about safety? You work in a very unsafe and unhealthy environment. Construction is the number one unsafe industry in the country.

J.B. It's number one now? It used to be the coal miners.

J.L. So how do you find the union in terms of health and

safety issues?

J.B. It varies from job to job. Well, sometimes I'm not aware of what the union may or may not have done on a job site pertaining to health and safety. Our shop stewards are presumably the individuals that should be most concerned with that as a representative of the union, but each individual member is supposed to be informed and conscious about safety and potential hazards. And it really varies individual to individual. Some shop stewards are totally lax and ridiculous. They have gotten into their positions through cronyism. And then in some cases you find people who are handling the job more responsibly. On some job sites the General Contractor has safety meetings for the employers. Sometimes union representatives are involved in that. It really depends. Sometimes you find yourself on a job and you wonder, God, is anybody checking into things here? Are people following the law? Does this owner or contractor even have insurance? You know? You wonder what kind of characters are around. And maybe that's part of the reason why there is so much father/son and cronyism. Well, for instance, in the Structural Ironworkers, typically two connectors travel around together. They know each other's moves. They feel safer together and those two guys are partners. They sometimes get hired and fired together. I think some people are more comfortable working that way. For somebody who doesn't have any relatives or neighborhood friends or a rabbi, so to speak, or somebody who's taken them under their wing, it's difficult because sometimes you find yourself in a group of people who already know each other and they don't trust you. They just don't trust you, whether you're a man, woman, white, black, period. They don't trust you. And you feel it right away. And that's one way that you have to kind of prove yourself, that you are not only safety conscious for your own interests, but also you're not going to be careless and injure another guy. Of course, if you wind up with a total alcoholic it's an easy situation to fall into some sort of co-dependency or whatever, because what he's been waiting for, for months, is for somebody to come along to take care of him. And I think anybody can fall into that situation. And I think in our industry drinking is a big problem as it is all over the country in all kinds of jobs.

J.L. There's a book about ironworkers called On High Steel by this guy Don Cherry?

J.B. Yeah.

J.L. Have you ever read it?

J.B. Yeah. I read that many years ago.

J. Well, somebody read it and shared with me what was in the book and I was amazed at the high level of alcohol consumption among "on high steel" workers.

J.B. Oh well, my impression of that book is that it paints the ironworkers life as being nothing but the job and the bar, the job and the bar. And I don't think that guy was in the industry a real long time. I think it was interesting. Some of the technical information he had. But that kind of upset me to think that maybe here I was where everybody's life style consisted of just working and boozing it up, going to sleep and coming back to work. That's not true. I mean, clearly people have personal lives, family lives, other interests, social lives, much more than that book would ever give anybody the impression. But that kind of existence is something that one could fall into, especially if they're not in their own town where their family is and the only socializing they're doing is with their co-workers. It's happened to me for short periods of time where I'm so exhausted from the job that I don't really have any more energy except to maybe have a beer or more with some people from the job and get out some of the nervousness or anxiety about the latest safety disaster or something and then come home and sleep. And this has been a source of stress in my life because it means that I'm not taking care of my home and cooking and shopping. And it's very hard to do everything. I think some men, and certainly not all, because there's a high rate of divorce and there's a lot of different home set-ups, I think, I mean, from the guy who lives at the Y[MCA] to the guy who is totally taken care of by his family. Everything, I think, exists. Certainly the ironworker whose wife packs his lunch and makes sure he gets the right amount of sleep and makes sure that all the bills are paid, he is in a far stronger position than somebody who's trying to do all that for themselves.

J.L. Or she.

J.B. Well, I'm going to say in the case of many women, I mean, the single mother who might be attracted to this kind of work has a real tough row to hoe if she doesn't have a big family support network, or very close friends to help her. The single woman, as I have been on and off throughout being an ironworker. It's difficult enough because if you're working thirty-five hours and you're not on a job that's too rough, you can take care of some of the shopping and laundry and housekeeping, etc. If you've been in bad economic straits and now you've got a good overtime job and you think you're going to make some money, well, you wind up paying to have somebody wash your clothes, and going out to dinner a lot, and in the long run you haven't raised your standard of living at all. So I would say that for me this business has allowed me to have kind of a typical blue collar standard of living, I mean, certainly better than somebody in a sweatshop, but I would not say that I've really been doing that terrific. Some of the guys who are more connected in the local through friends in the family and stay more steadily employed, they have less problems on the job, some of the problems that I may have as a woman, or whatever my personal situation is at the time. I know that there are men of the same amount of skill who have made three times my yearly income, and then consistently, year after year.

Sometimes I've felt like after the first few years that I had finally graduated from some kind of lower economic class to finally being able to start to identify with the middle class. I mean, it shouldn't have been that way. It should have been more lucrative, I think. But as I say, there's a lot of factors as to what influences whether you're working or not working. I've quit jobs and I've been laid off. Sometimes I quit jobs because things just get too uncomfortable for me, for one reason or another, and a lot of times it has to do with who I am as a woman and my age, the type of guys I'm around, maybe.

J.L. So tell me about how you've related to the union. How have you integrated yourself into the union?

J.B. Yeah. My way of assimilating or integrating has been, even though I stick out like a sore thumb from day one, to try to be kind of the average ironworker in many other ways and in that sense I haven't seen myself, while I might identify with the idea of being a pioneer, but I don't see myself as a leader, a leader of women, a leader of union democracy. I don't think that there's an opportunity there for me. I don't know if I'd have anything to gain. And it certainly is uncomfortable to have too much of a say or to stick your neck out too far because you're always the new person, as a minority or as a woman. I also say minority in the sense that I feel that some of the experiences and some of the psychological stuff that goes on with me, I know that there are some black guys or other ethnic groups that might experience similar things. Like just this morning, this guy said that he's going to take a job with the City. It's less pay but it's better for his head. And he's clearly talking about the oppression that he feels as a black guy in this local, and I think he's clearly talking about when you work with a lot of different characters, a lot of different personalities, it takes a lot of politicking sometimes to get along with everybody. And sometimes you just don't have the energy to do all that. You know? And so to work for the City means a more stable group of people that you're going to see every day and you can start to fit in and just stay in. And that's what he wants to do. And I can relate to that feeling although I'm not interested in a City job.

J.L. So in terms of your experience of the union, what kinds of things do you think you've learned that might be helpful to others?

A. For other women? Oh, I should mention, I brought up the business of feeling some alliance with some of the minority workers as a woman; that we share some similar experiences. I have also participated in meetings of black and Latin men, women, white women and we who see ourselves on the outside of kind of the network that gets the good jobs, the better jobs, the shop steward jobs, the foremanships, all the things that might make a bigger yearly salary and might make you more comfortable on the job. We feel like we've been pretty much cut out from that so it's kind of

a rank and file group with a particular mission which is to work with the union officials, whoever is elected, work with other members to open up opportunities in a more even-handed or a fairer distribution of some of the fruits of the business. You know?

J.L. So how has that worked out? What ways have you found to work with the union?

J.B. Well, we take this past election. I think the Business Agent who got the most number of votes, although he has a broad popularity, I think that our votes were shown. And for him to get the most votes also gave him more influence and power as far as what territory in the New York area he would be responsible for. We pledged to vote as a block so this way we could see the effect that we had. We did not vote for another Business Agent and we're one of the factors why he's no longer in office. The first black union official was elected in a less important category, but it's a start. He had run in quite a few elections. He's finally in. And the first Puerto Rican has a union post now, and I think that we had an effect there. We also had discussions with the candidates and some of us spoke very openly about the fact that we don't feel we got a good deal.

J.L. You set that up, those discussions? Was that posted so that people could come and hear what they had to say?

J.B. It was open to all minority members and women, and it was open to certain white members who have an interest in the same mission. And it was open to anybody who was running for an office to express their views. Not all the candidates even bothered to show up, which indicated to us their feelings about our issues. And the meetings were organized by some of the ironworkers who live out here in Brooklyn and other parts of the City. And that's what that's about. I think people see the need to continue the meetings and I think it's going to have even more influence than we've had now.

J.L. How are you planning to hold these people accountable? What's the plan?

J.B. Through continuing communications and negotiations. There's some resentment that our group even exists because some of the officials don't want to go back to the days of when there was an Italian group and a German group and the Jewish group and an Irish group and they felt that that was divisive. But some of the guys who are saying that have such a tight network of friends and family who are of almost exclusively one ethnic group that I kind of question how they're putting into practice their own sense of democracy. So that's one thing I've been participating in. So in addition to going to union meetings, --official union meetings, -- I've also been a part of this discussion.

J.B. Now, to promote that, you have to organize your network

so that people know there are meetings. How have you done that?

J.B. Well, I have not become a central organizer of this group. I'm strictly a participant. But I'm very vocal. Just recently, I've probably been one of the most vocal in questioning and challenging all the candidates. But the officers of this little group send out mailings and notify the people of when the next meeting's going to be.

J.L. There's not been anything that's posted on the job site?

J.B. Well, again, there's so much variety of the different jobs. I mean, you might post it on a site and not another iron-worker's going to see it. And then you might be on a big job where the officials have their cronies and they are so receptive to any kind of change, you would really be challenging them very directly to post anything that they did not post themselves. You know? You might in that case speak on a person-to-person basis with people and let them know. I mean, most of the politicking in this Union is done over the phone, in bars, taking walks, on the job.

J.L. How many people are in your local?

J.B. I thought it was fifteen hundred. I learned recently it was less than that now. I'm not sure. Maybe between twelve and fifteen hundred members.

J.L. Well, what territory does it cover?

J.B. It covers all the five boroughs, Westchester County and both counties on Long Island.

J.L. And so how many minorities are in the union? How many people (remainder of question droned out by airplane)

J.B. You know, if you would have asked me these questions a month ago before I took a vacation and my head landed in California, I might have been a little fresher on the ... the topic. I would say of the minority members, most of the members who have had a good number of years are aware or participating in this group and definitely consider the ideas of this group when they go about their business. The thing about our local is ---and one thing that I feel that us as a group, minorities and women, may not understand, especially just coming into the local, --is that you're really seen kind of as a free agent or an independent contractor or a freelancer in some respects, even though you're a union member. In our local you have the right to solicit your own work. You can solicit that work through communication with the employer, with a foreman you've worked for, with an old friend. You can shape the jobs which means, show up on the job site looking for somebody in charge and saying: I need a job. Are there any openings? You can talk to the shop steward. He may or may not have influence. You can talk to the General Contractor. Or, if

there is an Affirmative Action office it may or may not help you. At the Convention Center I found some people at their so-called Affirmative Action office very unhelpful to me for the time I was there or when I shaped the job.

Sometimes I got the impression a little bit that a couple of women were more interested in getting their boy friends or friends or family ... somebody else gave me the impression that she really was doing the right job so--you know--it may or may not work to your benefit. Again, there's no guarantee. So with us, we have to try everything, we have to stay steadily employed. If you don't have anybody, like, guiding you along, -- which most people don't--you have to try to get a job from your contacts, meaning union or employer, you have to shape the hall ... you're supposed to shape the hall, which means sitting down in this room early morning and seeing if you're next to go out on a job. You need to shape the sites themselves. And when you're really desperate you start doing the work of the Business Agent and find out where work is even going on because you feel like maybe somebody's not doing enough or you'd be working. So it can be all consuming. Being unemployed could take up as much time or more than having a job, 'cause at least, having a job, you can relax a little about the finances.

J.L. In your local, what's the unemployment rate now about?

J.B. I am not privy to statistics but I heard that ... one guy said to me today ... that seven hundred people are out of work. That would be half the local right now. A couple of months ago I heard it was two or three hundred. You know? And so, let's say, if we have fourteen hundred -- you know ... One thing that exists and hopefully this is going to change in the next ten years, is that there's kind of a back door and a front door when it comes to shaping the [Union] Hall. A lot of the people who feel kind of left out are sitting in the back room, and it's usually mostly black men, one or two women, and one or two guys that seem to be being punished for one thing or another. If they're white guys sometimes they're coming back from the drug rehab center ... You know? It's not necessarily ... Well, let's say, I mean, I don't believe that the extent or frequency of your employment necessarily reflects that you're a good or bad worker. I think both things are true: that if you're a good worker chances are you will stay more steadily employed. But I also know that there are good workers who are sitting down at our Union Hall waiting to go out on a job, and the reason why they're not working has a lot to do with their non-favored status among some of the bigots in the local.

J.L. Switching over to another subject just because we can't talk all night, although I'd like to, is what's your advice to other women?

J.B. Okay. One thing I should say is one reason I declined to

be interviewed and haven't played a big role in some of the organizations that have tried to move women into the trades is because I've felt very conflicted throughout the years in even interesting a woman in taking on the challenge that I have. In that way I don't see myself as a recruiter. (Laughs) I think it really depends on the individual whether she's up for it. It's a big gamble. It's a big risk. You know, clearly, somebody to take on this kind of work needs to be able bodied, willing to keep herself strong and healthy, somebody who can get along with a lot of different types of people, especially men. If a woman doesn't feel comfortable around a lot of men this is not the business for her. Also, somebody who has a good sense of humor and can take a joke, even if she's the butt of the joke, and somebody who doesn't take every comment personally. I think a lot of these things are true of a man getting into it too, but I think the idea that you're in a minority group and that you should be conscious of what that might mean and look at that experience in other situations in society and just think,--you know,--can I handle being kind of the odd ball? Do I mind feeling like an outsider? Am I that strong as an individual or internally that I can spend all day with people who really would rather I not be there? And then, as you go through the years, it gets easier. You know? You start to get a reputation. You find a lot more friends. You choose your friends and allies based on how you help each other. And yet, you always might run into a group of guys who don't know who the hell you are and you start again as an apprentice first day. (Laughs)

J.L. So there are a lot of different summary questions I could ask, but how do you feel about being an ironworker? How does it make you feel when you say that you're an ironworker?

J.B. Well, I'm proud to the extent I've learned skills that help me make my living. And some of my other interests sometimes conflict with my job as an ironworker. Sometimes I would rather be involved doing renovation work or work that has more aesthetic value than some of the jobs I've been on. When I'm on a job that's--you know---a fancy storefront on Fifth Avenue or pyramids on top of a building somewhere--you know--I do enjoy that aspect that I can look at it or show other people, and I'm proud of feeling that I did a good job when I was there. Depending on who I'm with, I may or may not kind of play up the fact that I'm an ironworker because I think that some people have a lot of skepticism about whether I'm really doing my job.