

CHICAGO TEAMSTERS JOINT COUNCIL 25



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HARDHATS DON'T DEFLECT UNION WORKERS' HARDSHIPS

In a dank basement on Michigan Avenue, a 24-year-old apprentice plumber strained on a ladder, gripping a claw hammer as he struggled with a storm pipe.

Watching the young worker, Frank Zalud, a veteran union tradesman, called out in a voice of encouragement: "Hey! You winning the battle?"

"No," replied Joe Beemsterboer, lanky and dirt-smudged, his voice cracking with a hint of emotion. "I am absolutely not winning."

For workers in hard hats these days, it can seem like they are up against it.

A majority of Americans now say unions are bad for the nation, according to Gallup polls. And the loss of two big trade shows at McCormick Place, for which the expense of union help was blamed, is bound to provoke more grumbling about organized labor in Chicago, traditionally one of the most loyal of union towns.

At the office building construction site at the corner of Michigan Avenue and Monroe Street, the talk among union workers the other day was tinged with bitterness. Many of the workers said they think they get a bad rap.

But at Gage, a fashionable cafe just a block from the pounding hammers and buzzing saws, Steve Thompson, a cyber-executive, said he considered \$40-an-hour pay "unreasonable" for the crowd in steel-toe boots, "given their education and training."

To workers in the trades, that kind of talk is as familiar as the freezing wind that slaps their faces on outdoor job sites, sometimes while working on a six-inch wide steel beam on the 75th floor.

Mr. Beemsterboer has friends who are teachers, lawyers, college students. He has heard every kind of lunkhead stereotype about people in construction. It stings.

"My friends say, 'Aw, come on, you guys just sit around and drink beer most of the time, don't you?'" said Mr. Beemsterboer, who wears a blue bandanna inside his hard hat and an Abercrombie sweatshirt under his bib overalls. "People look at us like we're lazy. Even my girlfriend, who's a teacher, doesn't really get it. We work very hard."

Now in the fourth year of his apprenticeship, he attends union trade school every Tuesday night, from 5 to 9, to

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learn about building codes and blueprints.

Times have changed. Now the unions have more black and Latino members, and women, too. Unlike the 1960s, when angry men in hard hats scowled at Vietnam war protesters, union members in last year's election gave their support to Barack Obama.

The cozy old "dad and lad" tradition — fathers handing union membership to sons — has given way to rigorous testing and schooling.

As it happens, Mr. Zalud, 39, has a college degree in business administration.

Beer drinking? Having a drink at lunch will get you fired. Drug tests are routine. Mr. Zalud said he has had four or five surprise drug tests.

"I don't drink," he said, "and I've never even had a cigarette."

The superintendent on the job is Jay Quinn, 49, who occasionally comes across a worker who is a slacker, someone who "just wants to find a place to hide."

They do not hide for long; Mr. Quinn will fire them.

It is rarely an issue. On this job, most of the workers show up 30 minutes before the shift starts at 6 a.m.

"With times being so tough," said Mr. Quinn, "anybody still working is the cream of the crop."

In a makeshift lunchroom for ironworkers, a radio played "Running on Empty." These are guys who follow the news, and they are fed up with anti-union talk.

Tom Clark, a 56-year-old with a long gray ponytail — an ironworker who walks narrow beams 70 stories above the pavement — has seen the public mood toward workers go sour before.

In the early 1980s, during the Rust Belt downturn, it was popular to bash unions. "They're looking for a scapegoat," he said. "And so they look at us."

John Delarosa is a 35-year-old electrician whose mother was born in Mexico. He makes \$40 an hour, enough for his family to live in a three-bedroom house in the suburbs.

He is grateful, but said people who wear suits to work never seem to have to apologize for making a good living.

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He wears a headlight around his hard hat to navigate dark spaces. He sometimes pokes his head through a hole and comes face to face with a crowd of mice or rats.

“The worst are the cockroaches,” he said.

He is earning his paycheck.

This story, written by Dirk Johnson, was originally published by Chicago News Cooperative on November 29, 2009. Johnson is a Chicago journalist who frequently writes for the New York Times. Visit Chicago News Cooperative online at ChicagoNewsCoop.org.