

Organized Labor - May 22, 2006

*By Mike Theriault*

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## CityBuild

Once upon a time, public high schools prepared students for apprenticeships and careers in the trades through shop classes and “vocational education.” Then the fashion-driven world of educators decided that “vocational education” was passé. When I used the term in a conversation with an educator recently, I was scolded, “We don’t talk about vocational education any more.” Maybe educators saw the decline of America’s manufacturing and extractive industries and decided that training students for blue-collar work was a waste of resources; the future would be in jobs that required college education. Maybe they came to believe that students were being tracked to “vocational education” not because of vocations, not because of certain aptitudes or interests, but because of economic background, race, or ethnicity.

School shops were closed. Equipment was sold off or left to grow antiquated. Shop teachers were laid off or not replaced on retirement. John O’Connell, the high school that had fed generations of San Franciscans into the trades, was rebuilt as a computer school just as much of that work was going offshore.

Blue collar work hasn’t disappeared. We in the Building Trades are still here. So are mechanics and machinists of various kinds, railroad workers, truck and bus drivers, longshore workers, stationary engineers, marine engineers, deckhands, and many others who work simultaneously with their shoulders and their heads. A “post-industrial” economy still requires skilled blue-collar workers.

And if students were assigned to vocational classes for the wrong reasons, the fault lay not with the classes, but with educators themselves, and did not preclude a need for the real opportunities the classes provided.

Meanwhile, as vocational education was being discarded, neighborhood activists in San Francisco looked around them at unemployed residents and asked a reasonable question: Why shouldn’t the very considerable money that the City spends in various ways on construction be used to put its own residents to work? As a result, local hire provisions were inserted into public contracts. Representatives of community-based organizations (CBOs) visited jobsites to assure that contractors were making efforts to live up to them.



Many San Franciscans found their way thereby into careers in the trades. With no preparation from the schools, others arrived on jobsites with little notion of the physical, mental, and attitudinal demands of construction. The failures of these latter became the subjects of stories circulated among trades foremen and workers. They provided an excuse for cynicism toward local hire requirements on the part of contractors – many of whom had steady crews that they were never pleased to augment or divide in any case. Some CBOs had pre-apprenticeship programs that did a good job in preparing applicants otherwise unacquainted with construction for what would be asked of them. Others had no such programs but continued to insist on local hire provisions for their neighborhoods.

In 2002-2003 Supervisor Sophie Maxwell, disappointed with local participation in the Third Street Light Rail project and enthused by the Cypress Mandela program in Oakland, began advocating for a similar program here. Founded in 1993 in connection with freeway and parkway work resulting from the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the program as one of its efforts gave students sixteen weeks of rigorous pre-apprenticeship training. It claimed an eighty-five percent rate of placement of students in the trades and a seventy-five percent retention rate.

Mayor Gavin Newsom agreed with her and took steps to organize the program, which they named CityBuild. He appointed Chris Iglesias, formerly of the Redevelopment Agency, to head it. Mr. Iglesias began discussions immediately with me – I had just taken office – and with the Northern California Carpenters Regional Council, which had played a central role in developing and staffing the Cypress Mandela program. We all agreed that pre-apprenticeship training, a “CityBuild Academy” on the Cypress Mandela model, would be a critical feature of CityBuild. The Academy would serve the entire city. It could provide some of what the schools no longer provided. CBOs would recruit and evaluate candidates for it and provide assistance to them after their entry.

Soon City College stepped forward and offered its Evans Campus as a location for the Academy. Dates were set for the first class. Recruitment targets were given to the CBOs.



*Glaziers 718 volunteers replace windows at the home of Geri Warren, wife of the late Stan Warren. L-R: Richard Lucha, Leland Wong, Larry Stavosky, Nick Barulich, Doug Yamamoto. Kneeling: Dan Angel, Steve Zuniga*

But there was a gap in the logic of the program. If unions were to accept apprentices for employment on City work but that work did not pass through union hiring halls, those apprentices would be unemployed and could not fulfill their apprenticeships. To dispatch them to non-union companies without assurances of their benefits and conditions would be unacceptable. The sole possible guarantee on publicly-funded work that employment would pass through union hiring halls and that work would be performed under union conditions and compensated with union benefits would be a project labor agreement with those features negotiated into it. The City had never had a project labor agreement with the San Francisco Building and Construction Trades

Council for any of its work, and much of that work over the years had been performed by non-union contractors.

On behalf of the Council, then, I insisted that we see some progress toward project labor agreements for City work before we became fully involved with the Academy. The date of the first class arrived and we had not seen that progress. The Carpenters honored their commitment to the City, provided instructors, and began teaching the class. Sessions that would have been devoted to presentations to the students by other trades or to hands-on experiences with their work were used for something else.

Now, however, we have seen some of the progress for which we asked. The Public Utilities Commission has voted to instruct its staff to negotiate a project labor agreement for work on its huge Water System Improvement Program, the “Hetch Hetchy” bond project. The San Francisco Unified School District has told its staff to negotiate a project labor agreement for work under its last bond measure; while separate from City government, the District can tie its work readily to CityBuild, and I have asked it to do so. Accordingly, individual trades are now discussing with Mr. Iglesias the details of their participation in the Academy for its next class cycle, which begins in June.

Clearly we can hope and ask for more project labor agreements for City work. We can ask also that CityBuild develop other features to reach more deeply and effectively into the communities it is meant to serve. A G.E.D. program that permits tailoring to individual needs of students and thus accelerated completion would give more applicants access to the Academy and apprenticeships. An English as a Second Language program built around construction terms would also give more applicants access, while

contributing to safety when the applicants become apprentices and start work. Chinese for Affirmative Action developed such a program some years ago and then handed it over to City College. Both organizations are in discussions with CityBuild to link the program to the Academy. This link should be encouraged.

Most importantly, some provision for childcare that accommodates construction hours should be made. Any of us who have tried to make arrangements for childcare while working construction know how difficult (or nearly impossible) it is to find a provider that will both accept our children at the early hour when we have to start our drives to often distant work and keep them without charging us more than we earn when we are obliged by construction necessities to work overtime. CityBuild will have to make an extraordinary effort to arrange for such a provider if it is to help families out of poverty through construction jobs.



*Labor meets with Legislators at the State Capital on May 2nd. L-R: William Nack, Business Manager San Mateo Building Trades Council; Shelley Kessler, Executive Secretary-Treasurer San Mateo Central Labor Council; Tim Paulson, Executive Director San Francisco Labor Council; Michael Theriault, Secretary-Treasurer San Francisco Building Trades Council*

What is more, CityBuild will have to subsidize that childcare so that students and then apprentices can pay on a sliding scale – free when they are in the Academy, minimally when they start their apprenticeships, full boat when they approach or reach journeylevel. If a childcare program that accommodates construction hours can be expanded eventually to attract participation by San Franciscans throughout the trades, and not just those served by CityBuild, it might even become self-subsidizing. Although men will use it (as I would have when my sons were young and my wife was in college) it should also permit many more women to enter the trades.

CityBuild's first class graduated Friday, May 12, in the South Light Court at City Hall, in front of posters from the reconstruction of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake and fire. Mayor Newsom, Supervisor Maxwell, and Bobby Alvarado of the Carpenters spoke to them. The graduates appeared enthusiastic, eager to work. The first calluses, the first sore muscles, the first scorching or icy days, the first exhausted evenings, the first bruises and cuts and burns and scrapes are yet to come. We have yet to see how successful their transitions into their new careers will be. Some did go to work even before the class was completed. Reports so far are good. Prospects so far are excellent.