

Author's Preface

By Ellie Belew

Red Letter Press asked me, as an autonomous historian, to document the history of the ten women who went through Seattle City Light's Electrical Trades Trainee (ETT) program, and the program itself, including its designer and director, Clara Fraser.

The more information I gathered and organized for this book, the more I came to appreciate the sheer tenacity of these women—their desire and insistence throughout all their struggles, not just for equality but for equity.

It is almost inconceivable, some 45 years later, to appreciate how unyielding these women were. The ETTs persevered, learning a multitude of difficult and unfamiliar skills while enduring an almost daily mix of harassment, slurs, innuendos, and sometimes illegal workplace practices. Socialist feminist Clara Fraser came to City Light after years of organizing, rallying, and training workers. She brought a practical vision for a successful women's ETT program within a publicly owned utility and was not about to let anyone, including the powers-that-be, block this program or the social reforms it would deliver.

Power over the ETT program initially lay with City Light Superintendent Gordon Vickery; with Seattle Mayor Uhlman; and to some degree, with IBEW #77, the union representing City Light's electrical trade workers, including the ETTs. Less obvious, but ultimately more powerful than any of these, were the cumulative efforts of the ETTs, Fraser, the Freedom Socialist Party, Radical Women, and ever-increasing public support for affirmative action at City Light and the City of Seattle.

Stakes were high for all parties involved, but ultimately the ten ETTs were the program. They were considered by many to embody the success or failure of the program, their personal accomplishments were ascribed to the program, while they were individually

and collectively the target for opposition to the program itself. In the face of endless challenges and defeats, these women refused to give up. Two left for other work before the ETTs won the discrimination complaint that reinstated their jobs. Two were seriously injured on the job. All struggled to advance according to their abilities.

Such heroism is often portrayed simplistically, with evil-to-the-core villains and faultless heroes. (Heroines are rare.) In this book, the heroines (and some heroes) are just like you, like your co-workers, your neighbors, your friends. They faced the same or greater risks as you will, when you step up. Their stories are a testament to what can be changed, and what it takes to do so.

Our work is before us. I second the words of Clara Fraser:

And what better fate can a person carve out than participation in the emancipation of humanity? What better use to make of one's life than in preparing that new civilization? We look toward a time when we shall have ceased to mourn martyrs. A time when we are no longer occupied with explaining defeats and rising above betrayal. Not because we will have forgotten the past, but simply because we are so engrossed and fulfilled in the role of creating a world rich with freedom, plenty, humane relations between people, and the joy of living.¹

–April 2018

Introduction

By Megan Cornish

There are milestones that reward all the struggles we women had to get into our trades.

Like the distinct sense of accomplishment when you pass an electrical pole or a vault or a piece of substation equipment and think, “I helped build that.” Like the special moment when you realize that crew chiefs meeting with you to arrange outages are treating you with the same respect as your male co-workers.

One of my treasured memories is when, early in my career at Seattle City Light, an older white journey-level worker confided to me how his attitude had changed toward men of color and women electricians because of their positive influence in making the union stronger and more militant.

But there is also a price that we advance troops paid—both those who were forced out and those who stayed. Many of the personal stories in this book describe this cost. Heidi Durham, who broke her back in an on-the-job accident and suffered early onset Alzheimer's disease, paid the hardest. Yet she was also a dynamic organizer and leader for many years, embodying the rewards of fighting the good fight in a rich but too brief life.

This book is a close-up of a drama enacted nationally by women who risked heartache to seek the simple pleasures—and higher paychecks—that come with careers in construction trades and other “male” jobs. Huge thanks to Ellie Belew for telling this history from the authentic perspective of the pioneers—and radicals—who too often get written out of “official” narratives. According to establishment pundits, integration into trades in the 1970s happened because society somehow just got enlightened and opened the doors of opportunity. Well, no. It was a hard-fought battle. Those doors were forced open with pry bars!

This book not only shows that you can fight misogynist institu-

tions, it's an essential guide on how to do it. As in the Black civil rights movement, which made affirmative action measures like the Electrical Trades Trainee program possible, the elements of success were militant leadership, a cohesive group of fighters, and community support.

Clara Fraser, the architect of and mentor to Seattle City Light's Electrical Trades Trainee (ETT) program for women, taught us the lessons of her long history of radical organizing and building working-class solidarity. She participated in a union drive at a big Chicago department store during WWII. Later she was an assembly-line electrician at Boeing in Seattle and, during the long strike of 1948, helped organize a stroller brigade of mothers and babies in defiance of an anti-picketing injunction. She was arrested in 1969 while supporting a strike of women photo-finishers and won vindication in court. In 1971, after an arrest when police raided a benefit for the antiwar Seattle Seven defendants, she successfully defended herself in court (going on to teach the popular "Women's Legal Self-Defense" class series). During this period, she worked in various parts of the federal anti-poverty program, becoming an ace trainer who helped men and women of color gain vital job skills. She wrote on the inseparability of the "race question," the "woman question," and the class struggle as early as 1965.

No surprise then that the groups she helped form, Radical Women (RW) and the Freedom Socialist Party (FSP), were also in the forefront in recognizing these interconnected issues. We organized with the Black Panther Party and defended them in the streets. We supported the battles waged by the United Construction Workers Association for hiring people of color. Our members, including me, were arrested with them in civil disobedience actions. We worked with Black women from the anti-poverty program to launch the first demonstration for legalized abortion in Washington State. We defended Native American fishing rights and occupations, supported farmworkers, marched against the Vietnam War, and helped organize the first staff strike at the University of Washington. We were in the leadership of some of the first lesbian/gay marches in Seattle. Radical Women members became truck drivers, welders, firefighters,

phone installers and bus drivers. For a handful of women, we broke into a hell of a lot of trades!

I moved into Clara's highly political collective household soon after joining Radical Women. During the City Light walkout that exploded right before the ETTs started work, I had the thrilling experience of hearing about each day's events and listening to her plot strategy in evening phone conversations with co-workers.

That was the background for the battle by Radical Women members Heidi Durham, Teri Bach and me to become high-voltage electricians at City Light.

And it was a battle. If we and other ETTs had not fought together against City Light management, all or most of us would've been gone in short order, and few other women would have followed. The doors would have been closed, even to those women who came along later and distanced themselves from those of us they called "troublemakers." Instead, our activism and on-the-job persistence had a ripple effect on public and private employment in the whole area.

It can't be emphasized enough that structural racism and sexism have always made it doubly hard for women of color to get in and stay in non-traditional trades and occupations. Until they get equal access, no one's gains can be lasting. RW members went to public hearing after public hearing calling on the city to set up a separate category and hiring goals for women of color, because they were—and still are—being left out.

It was the economic double-jeopardy of sexism and racism that forced Daisy Jones, a Black woman and the most seasoned leader among the ETTs, to quit the program for a lower-paid job before we were actually laid off. She had to support her children. But this meant she automatically lost the ability to return to the utility when the ETTs won our discrimination case.

Job fairness and pay equity are fundamental class issues. Racism and sexism are so embedded in this country that they have severely weakened class consciousness. That's why integrating the workforce is key to building a strong labor movement. We have to demand a bigger "pie" for workers instead of being forced to vie

with each other for ever-shrinking pieces.

The RW members at City Light were always clear that any grief that came down on women electricians and men of color was attributable to management. Many of our tormenters on the crews bought their place in management that way.

Let's be clear about this: affirmative action was the only way that men of color and women of any race got into trades. There was no "level playing field" then and there isn't now. When conservatives finally were able to recast affirmative action as somehow unfair to white men, systemic racism and sexism slammed the doors to jobs and education almost as tight as they had been in the 1970s. Today, women are only three percent of construction, mining and petroleum workers. Only 12.2 percent in these fields are non-white.

The powers-that-be haven't stopped with chipping away at affirmative action, either. All the social gains won by working people in the 20th century are being rolled back. We will lose them all unless we learn the lessons of working-class solidarity and militancy.

Not everyone who reads this book will want to go into non-traditional trades. But I hope you will be inspired to become feminist activists and, dare I say it, radicals. Even more than when I started working at City Light, these times—when living standards of working people and even life on the planet are at stake—demand no less.

Speaking as a socialist feminist, I'm more convinced now than ever that the most basic demands for equality and a decent life for those who create the wealth of society, will never be won under the profit system. Without systemic change, hard-won reforms can only be retained through a perpetual fight.

Little did I know when I started out at City Light that this job would so much define my life. But I was already hooked on battling for a better world. And the joy, laughter and comradeship of that collective enterprise is its own reward. I recommend it to anyone.

–August 2018

Marcel Hatch/Freedom Socialist



Heidi Durham, Teri Bach and Megan Cornish show off their pole-climbing boots in anticipation of entering the City Light linework apprenticeship.