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New York's Men of Steel: Hard Hats, Soft Hearts



BY TANNEN MAURY—AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Tools in hand, a construction worker is ready to join the cleanup effort.

By SALLY JENKINS
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK, Sept. 14

They tramp into the smoke and dust, a legion of volunteer laborers wearing hard hats and tool belts and thick-soled boots. Hours later they walk out again, looking for fresh gloves and dry socks, or a sandwich, which they eat standing up. They crave food, and batteries.

The men who normally power and run this city, the lawyers, brokers and financiers, are useless. You can tell this by their papers, which have been blown to bits, those formerly crucial documents, so wordy and so thick, that they stuffed in their briefcases. What's left of the World Trade Center is a heap of twisted steel and ruined brick, substances with which many powerful New Yorkers have no experience. A building to them is something to walk through or ride up.

The rest of us don't know where or how to begin, but the impromptu volunteer army of workers does. "We built this city,

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New York's Army of Hard-Hat Heroes

CONSTRUCTION. From C1

you know," said Robert Doremus, 36, a carpenter from the Bronx.

They come in carrying Skil saws and wrenches, spades and Halligan tools. They drive loaders, excavators, backhoes and bulldozers. They commit grand acts of improvisation and problem-solving. "Every tradesman in New York is here," said carpenter Frank McCluskey of the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, Local 608. "All the construction jobs have ceased."

Elsewhere in the city, cranes stand motionless like birds listening to thunder. The men who operate them are on the only meaningful job, for which an entire city's intelligentsia, normally so supercilious, is suddenly and humbly grateful. The term "laborers" has a new respectability among their fellow citizens. The National Organization for Women won't be suing them for their hiring policies this week. And no one is calling them Larry Lunchpail or Joey Six-pack, either. Much has been said about the brotherhood of police and firemen working tirelessly in the rescue and salvage operation, but alongside them, the volunteers have worked just as heroically, and with a similar sense of brotherhood. "We had a lot of our own guys in there, we lost scores of men who were working on jobs," said McCluskey, of East Chester, N.Y. "Carpenters lost people. Electricians lost people. For us, it's personal."

They come in by busloads, organized by their local union chiefs. They report to a volunteer desk at the Jacob Javits Center and wait to be assigned shifts. Others simply walk up to the barricades at Canal Street, and show a union card to the cops, and ask to be put to work.

Hank Allan, 45, limped up Greenwich Street in a light rain Friday morning, his boots caked in ashy mud, his jeans and T-shirt gray, his glasses smudged with grime. He was coatless in the rain. Someone had given him two blankets, which he wrapped around his shoulders. Most of the work, he said, consists of "just moving big things." An exporter of heavy machinery, he arrived on the site Tuesday morning and immediately started up a Caterpillar, and helped get the rescue effort underway. Now, unable to stop yawning, he was looking for a train home to Tinton, N.J.

Ryan Lennon, a 23-year-old ironworker from Brooklyn, stood at the corner of West Street and Canal and pulled on dry gloves and adjusted his hard hat, preparing to return to the heap despite the fact that he had been on the job since Wednesday and worked for 15 hours straight, through the pelting rain Thursday night. "It was real muddy, wet, and glass kept falling in the wind," he said. "We're here no matter what."

In the heap, he said, you work until you can't anymore. "Or until the blisters on your feet start bleeding," he said.

Doremus, a carpenter with Local 608, was on Lexington Avenue and 86th Street when the terrorist attack began. He began walking. He walked all the way, a distance of about six miles, to the World Trade Center, where he had once helped build an office on the 48th floor in one of the towers, doing drywall and framing.

Doremus walked into the still-flaming wreckage and began helping the ironworkers. All night he carried oxygen tanks and hauled hoses to fuel their blowtorches. He didn't stop until 5 a.m. Wednesday, when he finally went to sleep in the lobby of the American Express building, next to a morgue. "My union brothers and sisters all worked in there," he said. "So, whatever hand I can lend. Every union job in New York City is shut down. They're all my union brothers and sisters, and we're banding together."



BY BETH KAISER—REUTERS

There's only one job for construction workers in New York this week—clearing the rubble of the World Trade Center.

In teams, they crawl over the mounds of wreckage, scale it with safety ropes and hooks, and dig through it with their hands. The hazards are numerous; they can't be certain of the air above them or the ground beneath them. The ruins shift under their boots, potential sources of cave-ins or gas main breaks, and windows overhead pop and send shards down on their heads. They ignore all this.

Firefighter Steve Hartman, a volunteer from West Orange, N.J., said, "It's like picking up garbage on your hands and knees. You pick it up and throw it in the bucket. You pass the bucket."

Somehow, they have created order and routine. The iron- and steelworkers cut at the massive beams with blowtorches. When they have cut through a section, the riggers come in and cable it to a crane. When it's cabled, the crane lifts and hauls it out, and drops it into a dumpster. Then the diggers go in to check the holes and crevices underneath. The diggers come upon crushed torsos, wire, sheetrock, broken chairs, office equipment, seat cushions and other flotsam. "You pick up a rock, and then a lady's handbag," one said.

Even when city officials announce they have enough volunteers for the moment, the laborers look for ways to help. John Haseman, 45, an operating engineer, and his son John Jr., a 24-year-old laborer, drove in from in Patchogue, Long Island, to sign up for shifts but were turned away. So they donated boxes of gear: hundreds of pairs of leather gloves, goggles, masks, hard hats. Also, fresh shirts.

Domingo Luciano, 27, a Bronx furniture repairman, went to a Kmart and bought $40 worth of new white socks. He stood on West Street and Canal, handing them out from a shopping bag to the weary, grime-streaked men who marched by.

Three ironworkers stamped along the Hudson River, asking strangers where they might find a place to park their truck. They had just driven 12 hours and 750 miles from Indianapolis to volunteer. Rob Jones, 31, Gary Renick, 50, and Randy Martin, 42, members of the Ironworkers Local 22, arrived in Manhattan at 9 a.m. Thursday. They signed in at a volunteer center and by lunchtime were sent into the smoldering heap of wreckage. They found the going slow. There weren't enough blowtorches—"Only had two on our side of the pile," Renick said.

The instability of the surrounding buildings caused periodic evacuations. Three sharp blasts from a horn meant they should run, the men were instructed. "It's dangerous," Renick said. "You can't just start banging and cutting and slopping things around." After a while, they were relieved and set off to find a place to park their truck and to sleep. They were worried about being towed. A city official told them they could park at Shea Stadium and take a bus back in. They set off wearily. "We intend to stay the week if they'll put us to work," Renick said.

Levern Floyd, a 48-year-old construction worker, showed his membership card for Building, Concrete, Excavating, Laborers Union, Local 731, and it was enough to get him in. He took a spot on the debris pile, passing buckets and pieces of twisted metal.

His usual job is with Perini Corp. Thirty people from the company went to the collapse site to volunteer.

"There are so many people who are down there dead. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't go," he explained. "I wanted to help someone. I am an American, and I feel what was did was wrong."

Nearby, a group of volunteers posed for a picture taken by a fellow worker. One in the group said to several passersby who stopped to watch: "You didn't see any day laborers down there. It was all union men." Then he added, his voice rising, "It was the kind of people the media says is paid too much."

In the financial district adjacent to the World Trade Center, men in coveralls move through the street with hoses and brooms and giant vacuum trucks, cleaning New York, washing its windows, sweeping its streets, and vacuuming the ash and papers from the sewers. They are fatigued, brave, angry and endlessly capable. They are the ones who can do the job. Carpenter Tom Killacky, of Hardyston, N.J., said, "We're going to build it back again, too. Watch." The financial markets will reopen Monday. Buy stock in men.

Staff writer David Brown contributed to this report.

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