

While We Were Sleeping...

Drinking From The Fire Hose

By Kurt Staudter

Cambridge, MA

The Harvard Trade Union Program is without a doubt the most significant learning experience of my life. Week three brought together a spellbinding collection of presenters on a wide range of subjects. While this program is directed at providing union executives a perspective on areas outside their normal expertise, it also covers topics that would be of interest to the wider audience. We heard from Boston College Law Professor Tom Kohler, who pointed out the inadequacies in our labor law, and the failure of those laws to not only protect union members but all workers.

We also heard from a gentleman with ties to Vermont, community organizer Michael Jacoby Brown, on the subject of his fascinating new book "Building Powerful Community Organizations: A Personal Guide to Groups that Can Solve Problems and Change the World." One of the most dynamic speakers of the week was Ron DeLord on the subject using the media to cultivate public opinion. Some of the radio ads that he has created for use in public information campaigns in support of police unions are superb. I'm so glad this guy is on our side.

The quality of the presenters and the range of subjects covered are making this an extraordinary experience for me. This week the three standout presentations came from International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers - Local 103 of Boston, Kris Rondeau an organizer from the Harvard Union of Clerical & Technical Workers, and the most powerful of them all, was a presentation on the role of labor in the aftermath of the 9/11 destruction of the World Trade Towers. After a slide show of pictures taken on the pile by a previous HTUP participant, we then had a talk from two of our classmates on their personal recollections - one a New York City Police Detective and the other a search and rescue expert that was brought in as part of a crew of firefighters from Rhode Island.

First I want to talk about the innovative things I saw at Local 103 in Boston. You knew you were in the right place miles before you got to their parking

lot: They have a huge power producing wind turbine that can be seen from the Mass Pike. IBEW Local 103 in one of the largest and most forward-thinking unions that trains and finds employment for electricians.

Now I'm not boasting about these guys because I'm in the same union, or because they put on a wonderful dinner for us, but because they are involved in what should be considered a model for vocational/technical education. Their training center runs one of the most sought after apprenticeships in New England. According to the director of the school, "we're more selective than Harvard." Thousands apply every year, only a few hundred get in, and even fewer still make it through the grueling five-year program. Not only do these lucky few learn a trade that will keep them employed their entire working life, but they can earn a college degree through a partnership with an area community college.

Now before I move on from here I just want to point out the major strength between this program and the problem with technical center in Springfield. Now while the focus of the combination of classroom and hands-on training at 103 is with the expressed aim of gainful employment, the focus at the tech center is a collection of mixed messages that seem to force participants to look beyond high school for the training they need for careers. Yes, the changing nature of the workplace means that continuing education will always be part of every workers life, but when the focus of the tech centers moved from vocational training to yet another avenue of college prep, it did many students a huge disservice. Nuff said.

The forum this week introduced us to Kris Rondeau, and in all the years I've heard and read speeches from labor leaders this was one of the most powerful. First you are disarmed by this unassuming woman who speaks in a calming and motherly tone, but then you are taken in by the honesty and humility that makes one believe that she is reluctant to take credit for all she accomplished. Kris was the leader that organized the support staff at Harvard against overwhelming odds and with minimal re-

sources. If there were ever a David and Goliath story this is it.

She said a lot of things during her speech, but two quotes will shape the way I approach problems in the fight for workplace justice: First she said, "Anger is a weak foundation for an organization;"

and second, "Union culture should never mirror or mimic management culture... ultimately it is labor's role to change the culture in the workplace." It sent chills down my spine to hear her: You just felt the wisdom.

Finally, we heard the heart-breaking stories of NYPD Detective Joe Cusanelli and RI Firefighter Paul Doughty. In the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack both of these guys were assigned the gruesome task of combing the pile, Joe for evidence of the crime, and Paul for survivors. The stories they've told will haunt me the rest of my life, but the other story that was told is equally compelling: The role labor played in the clean-up, and the sacrifice by our members that is still being tallied. Did you know that of the more than 3,000 that died, over 600 were union members? This wasn't just the cops and firefighters, and what's worse is that more still are now dying from what's called the "9/11 cough." In the wake of this horror, here's something that labor can be proud of: The clean-up was done almost exclusively by an army of 2,000 union members, came in at \$1 billion under budget, and eight months a head of schedule.

Now here's the most amazing part: Who can forget the twisted pile of wreckage, and I can't imagine how dangerous it was, but incredibly there were only 35 lost-time accidents. It's when I hear things like this it makes me proud to be a union man, but more than anything, it makes me wonder why no one sees fit to tell us this story.

