I remember my father used to always come home from work and fall asleep in the chair by the television after eating dinner, and I really never could understand it or appreciate why he was doing that—except that, "Gosh! Why did he always fall asleep?" You know, "Why isn't he more awake—have more energy?" But I can understand it now. It's exhausting! It's absolutely exhausting!

I started work as a shipscaler in nineteen seventy-six. What was it like? It was amazing. I think the first week I came home aching, feeling muscles I never knew I had. We were hauling steel, pieces of steel, out of a ship. As they were putting the ship together, they would cut off the steel supports, and we would have to lug everything out. It was heavy work—up ladders. It was physical, dirty work, very dirty. I came home very, very dirty. I remember it used to take me fifteen minutes to clean out my nose.

Exhausted! I was too tired to realize what was happening. Then I got my first paycheck, and I was just totally overwhelmed by making so much money. I remember talking to somebody and they were talking about making seven—what I thought was seven hundred and thirty-five dollars—seven thirty-five. And I thought it was seven thirty-five a month, and
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it turned out seven dollars and thirty-five cents an hour starting wages, and I had never made that much money.

I was also real naive. I know the first weeks that I was there we were following the chippers around to prepare for painting, and they didn't have any respirators, so they said, "We don't have respirators. Take a rag and wrap a rag around you." So I wrapped a rag around my mouth, the way that you see in the old movies, and worked for hours like that and would come home just barely able to breathe. But I hadn't realized there was such a thing as respirators and that they had to provide them. The one thing I started to learn about then was health and safety.

When I first went out there I worked repair, not new construction, so the ships were basically built. We scalers would just work on some aspect of the repair, either getting it ready for painting or cleaning up after somebody else. It meant working in confined areas like crawling in the bottom of bilges under engines. And a ship is very narrow, very small. You have to fit through small holes, which at times is a problem. You do a lot of climbing—sometimes just up ladder-type stairs, but sometimes in situations that made me feel very uncomfortable. One of the things that I think I became is more agile working down there, because I just had to get myself in places that normally I'd feel very uncomfortable about—either being too high or unprotected.

Well, there weren't many women in the shipyards. Those that were there were mostly shipscalers. The union is part of the Laborers International and has a large membership of black people and some white people. In fact most of the people of color in the shipyards were either shipscalers or painters, though over the time I was there it was noticeable to see the change in the color of people who were painters. More white men were coming in as painters. I understand that painters and shipscalers used to receive the lowest wages in the shipyard until the crafts bargained collectively as metal trades.
You see, there's all kinds of different crafts working in the yards. There's boilermakers, which weld. There's riggers, painters, shipscalers, machinists, electricians, pipefitters, carpenters, millwrights. . . .

I had noticed in the shipyards that people were coming out as trainees in the different crafts, so I tried to find out how to be a trainee. Specifically, I wanted to become an outside machinist, and I felt I was qualified to be a machinist. I had worked with machinists on the ship and quite a few times, in fact, I helped the machinist figure out what they were supposed to do—suggested how to do things—because a lot of them had absolutely no past background other than they went to the union and bullshit and got dispatched. I tried to get dispatched to the shipyard as a machinist. When I went down to the union, they asked me for my credentials, and I said I had completed mechanical apprenticeship in Oregon for a year and a half, and they asked me if I had a state certificate. I said, "No, it was not part of a state program."

So they said, "Well, that credential is not acceptable." So I went back out to the shipyard, and I checked with personnel several times about when there would be a machinist training program and how to get in. And they said when it opened, the union and the company that run the program would accept applications. As it turned out, I went into the personnel office one day, this was back in the beginning of May, nineteen seventy-seven, or something around that time. I had been periodically going in every week and checking on it and the guy said, "Oh! Today's the last day for applications! You had better hurry on down to the union hall"—meanwhile, it's quarter after four, four-thirty; union hall closes at five o'clock—"and get your application in."

I was furious! But I got down there and got my application in. Then they were doing interviewing, and I heard they had made selections on ten people who were entering the training pro-
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I hadn't had an interview, so I called up the union and they said they couldn't get in touch with me to tell me about an interview. I asked them, "Well, when did you call me?"

"During the day," I said, "During the day! I work down here at the shipyards. How can I be at home answering my phone?" So they said, okay, they were going to have another bunch of interviews and they were going to interview me. I waited and eventually was interviewed. In that second batch of people I was the only person that had any shipyard experience. I'd been working down in the shipyard for a year. One of the things they were concerned about was would you last in shipyard work. After all, it's very heavy. You have the weather. You work in very bad weather conditions—sometimes outside in the cold, wet. You work heights. And that was one of the things they were very concerned about in the interview, and I'd certainly proven that I could handle the work. In the interview they didn't ask me one question. They explained what the work was like, and I already knew what shipyard work was like. Then they asked if I had any questions, and I think I may have asked them one or two questions.

They chose eight people from this second group. I was not chosen. At that point there, I realized something's wrong. This is not right at all. Another thing that happened was that my business agent from the Shipscalers Union came up to me one day and said, "Gee, I understand that you went and applied for machinist."

And I was really surprised. I asked him, "Well, how did you know?" And somehow at the Metal Trades meeting that they had from all the trades that worked down at the shipyards, my application had somehow gotten discussed. Well, gee whiz, I figured, why did that happen? Except that perhaps the Machinists were trying to find out what exactly I had been up to in the Shipscalers Union. You see, we had been organizing a caucus and an alternative newsletter and were becoming effective in
making changes in the union. So I figured that’s the reason I didn’t get into the training program. But it wasn’t right.

Now, I’d been to a couple seminars where people had talked about the Federal Office of Contract Compliance in terms of contracts and affirmative action. I knew the company was getting favorable contracts, so I went in and asked to see their affirmative action program, and they told me, “It is the policy of the company not to allow the employees to review the affirmative action policy.” Boy, I thought this was bullshit. I wanted to get in touch with agencies to find out if that was illegal, but one of the difficulties of a job is that it’s hard to get in touch with agencies to find out exactly what your rights are.

Well, one day there was a bomb scare in the shipyards, and they sent us home early. On that day I was able to make some connections within the Department of Commerce, I think, Maritime Department of the Office of Federal Compliance. The agent I got ahold of was a bit disturbed about the situation and felt that, yes, in fact the company should show me their affirmative action plan. Would I not do anything, and he would speak with them and try to get them to realize that they were supposed to show me the plan? So they realized that they were supposed to show me the plan. I had to go in there after work, about ten minutes before the office closed, and read through the affirmative action plan. At that point there, I got—I started to get a reputation.

I then filed a complaint against the training committee because I was not given the job, and the man from the Office of Federal Compliance set up a meeting with the company, and they explained that they hired ten people and it turned out I was number eleven. One of the things that they used was past experience, and even though I was the only person that had any kind of shipyard experience, I’d had no training in high school shop. That was one of the points that they brought up, and I said,
"Yeah, that's true. When I went to high school, you couldn't take shop."

And what came out of that meeting was that the company said, "Okay, if there is ever an opening, you'll be the next person considered." This was in September—August of nineteen seventy-seven. At the end of that month, one of the machinist trainees quit. There was a position open. Well, nothing happened in September. Nothing happened in October. In all my attempts to speak with the personnel officer, I could never get through to him. They would never return any of my calls. I wrote letters. I never got any answers. Finally, I went back to the Office of Federal Compliance. The day before Thanksgiving I got called to the telephone during work and was told that Monday after Thanksgiving, nineteen seventy-seven, I would be part of the machinist training program. So why I got in is still somewhat a mystery, but I did become part of the Machinists.

In the program they made us go to school one day a week, where a foreman taught the class. It was a terrible experience because he didn't know how to teach, and what he did teach quite often was incorrect and useless. We started off working at seventy percent of journeyman wages. After eight months you went up to eighty and after eight months more you went up to ninety and by the end you would make one hundred percent. It was a two-year program, and basically it was cheap labor. Since machinists were only making maybe fifteen cents an hour over shipscalers, or a quarter at the most, I took a wage cut in order to get my training. Several of the other people had experience as being outside machinists, but in other fields, so they had to get legitimate credentials by going through the training program.

Outside machinists are pretty much mechanics. On new construction you install a lot of machinery and precision fittings. In repair, you might repair, rebuild something, reinstall the line, a whole variety of work. It is outside work—not inside machining
work. You use standard mechanic's tools plus drills. You may need precision fittings. You need aligning tools. On elevator work, for example, or any kind of work where you'd set up motors and pumps, you need to align couplings. You might just do honing.

At that time there was no other woman working in the shipyards in the Puget Sound area as an outside machinist. Some of the men were very supportive. And then there were some people that were outright obnoxious, rude. Some would just tell me, "You, broad, go home. You should be home. You shouldn't be in the shipyard." People wrote things on the bulkheads of ships. Just outrageous stuff about women. You'd try to find a certain area where you had to go and work, and you'd take your flashlight and all of a sudden you'd shine on this bulkhead, and there would be a comment written there, literally engraved in steel, about—really nasty, derogatory comments about women, women's bodies, and what some men would like to do.

I think, generally, a woman taking a non-traditional job is a threat, in the sense that it's taking away a job, and then there's also the myth that women don't need to work. There have also been myths that women can't do the work and that's why they haven't been there. That's also not true, because during the war women worked in all the shipyard trades. They were very capable of doing the work, but after the war, when the soldiers came home, the women were encouraged to leave the shipyards and to start families and be housewives. There's an economic reason for that, and you can talk about it with the men.

I remember one of the things that I consistently did was that I was not derogatory when I referred to a woman. I mean, I don't refer to a woman as a chick or a broad, or whatever term they use. I consistently refer to somebody as a woman, and I could see that in some people over a period of time of working with them, maybe months, they kind of changed their way of referring to a female as a woman and not as something else.
I can remember once—I'll never forget this experience. We were aligning a brake in an elevator shaft, and it was a tremendous, huge piece of machinery, and I was working with this man that was very big. He was very tall, and he was very big, and they gave him this work because he could move things, and we were to align this brake, and he couldn't move it. One of the things I was learning was how you move things, how you set up different things to pry and push and pull, so I said, "Okay, Bill, give me the pry bar." This bar must have been six feet long, and we tried to pry the machinery just a li-i-ittle bit. And I said, "Okay, now I'm going to show you how to do it." Well, I got ahold of the pry bar, and I moved it so it was just right. I don't know why, somehow it just worked out that I did it. And that man stood there with his mouth open, and he would never, ever again in his life say anything that suggested that I couldn't do something. It's one of the things I'll never forget.

At one point between thirty and forty women filed a complaint of sexual discrimination against that shipbuilding company because of the locker-room situation. We had much lower standards of a locker room than the men did, and we were able to document and provide information that clearly showed that there was sexual discrimination on the job. Not only that, we went to the Metal Trades, which was made up of all the unions, because we felt that it was in violation of the contract, and they did not give us any support, representation, at all in this grievance. And as it turned out, not only was the company sued for discrimination, but the Metal Trades was sued as well. How that happened was that the Office of Women's Rights filed a director's complaint, which means that the director, herself, filed her own complaint against both the Metal Trades and the company for sexual discrimination on behalf of everybody who worked out there. It wasn't an individual complaint. It was a hot political issue because not only was the company being sued, so was the Metal Trades. They sat with that case for a long time.
and did nothing. Then there was a change in the Office of Women's Rights where the enforcement powers went to the state and, as far as I know, after three or four years, nothing came of it. Nothing was corrected.

It was an experience to realize, first of all, that the union is not going to give you any kind of support. And also realizing that agencies are not necessarily going to enforce non-discrimination or enforce affirmative action the way it should be done. A lot of people felt, what's the sense? If nothing's going to be done anyway, why waste your time and try to do something?

Well, what are your choices? What are your choices when your union is corrupt? My union, Machinists Local Number 79, is a union with a very rich and radical history. Presently it's a union that is being run by a bunch of irresponsible, unrepresentable goons that don't represent the needs of the membership, especially down in the shipyards. On a scale of zero to ten, ten being the highest, I'd say the Machinists Union—trying to be positive—deserves a score of point-seven-five, which isn't exactly the bottom, but it's far from the top—even satisfactory. Given that, what can you do? You can do nothing, or you can try to do something. How do you respond to people when they look around at the government that's in control now? Well, if they're not voted in, they're not going to have the power, and if people would vote for something else, would vote for change and to organize people so that would happen, then you'd have a choice of something different.

You need to see that the people in the union are representing the members' needs and that there's democracy within the union. I was shop steward down there for some time and filed grievances on behalf of other people and received no support whatsoever from the union. Many times the business agents would come out to the shipyards to take care of a grievance, and you never even knew they were there. They'd resolve a grievance without even contacting me or talking to me.
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I even had the experience, as being shop steward, of being physically attacked by the lead person, who was a member of my union. I filed a complaint the first time it happened. You have to understand that ships are very dangerous. There are holes to get down to different levels. A lot of times you’re working around holes, and I was very lucky I wasn’t in an area where I was likely to get hurt. We were on a ship and some people had come to complain that there was no ventilation. As shop steward, I went down there and had taken care of the situation, the ventilation. And on the way back up, the lead man lost his cool, grabbed hold of me and pushed me—pushed me down! I was scared. It’s frightening down at the shipyards. I had heard stories when I first went out there about how years ago they handled things. I guess a lot of people in the shipyards carried guns and—that disputes were handled in not the nicest way. It also is very dangerous. It’s very easy for something to fall on you. It’s very easy for someone to drop something that might be light, but if it falls down three, four, five.

Anyhow, the company investigated the lead man with the union’s presence, but the union—This was an example of where the business agent never even spoke to me while supposedly representing my interest. They found that should this man do it again, he would face serious disciplinary action.

It happened a second time. A pipefitter was doing machinists’ work, so I went up to the lead man to try to tell him that the work was not correct. He started yelling and hollering at me and grabbed a hold of me, and he pushed me to go back to work. I filed another complaint. Well, they did an investigation, only this investigation was a total farce. They interviewed people that weren’t even there and management. As it turned out, I subsequently filed union charges against this “brother.” At a pre-trial hearing it was determined that yes, in fact, the “brother” had conduct unbecoming a union member, and the charge deserved to go to trial. Several times it was scheduled to go to trial, but
the member never showed up. One time there was a snowstorm and supposedly it was going to be rescheduled. It was never rescheduled. There was never a formal investigation of my charges. Whenever I asked, nobody knew what happened to it.

If you're a woman, your choices are to be harassed day after day to make a good living, and do it for as long as you can, and then when you can't tolerate it any more, you take a vacation. I mean I have a pattern, and I've seen it in other people, too, that work in non-traditional jobs, that you can't work there endlessly, that you need to take a break, that it just—the harassment, the daily pressures, the stresses get to be too much. You know, day after day you wake up saying, "Oh, boy! I'm gonna have to be belligerent today! What am I gonna put out today?" And you walk out of there every day after work, turn around and look in the shipyard and say, "Well, thank goodness, I'm leaving today in one piece." It gets to be too much, and it's okay to say, "All right, I've had enough!" It doesn't mean that you're not a good person, that you're not a strong person.

I've gone through stages of just totally being devastated—a mess—a wreck—physically and emotionally. I used to go dancing at least once a week to kind of try to work that stress out. For support I mostly turned to my friends. I also turned—there was a—still is—a group called Women in Trades, which offered support. Several times I needed legal advice and I got it from them. Actually, I had basically, at one point, decided that this was enough. I wasn't going to continue any more and spoke with somebody from Women in Trades and regained my strength.

I'm no longer an outside machinist. It became clear that working in a shipyard, very often you're left up to the mercy of the union, because they're the dispatcher. After I had been working at one company for some time, I had some protection through seniority, but the union and the company together
were able to pull off a scam that basically said I had voluntarily quit and lost my seniority. When I couldn’t get my job back, I realized I needed additional skills so that when I was blacklisted I could get a job. I took an electrical power program at the community college and now am an electrician for the city.

I think it’s a good thing for women to work in non-traditional work because it breaks down the mysticism. But I also think it’s devastating to someone day after day to be put through the ordeal that generally you’re put through when you work non-traditional work. It’s hard, though, working in any kind of job. I think even white male workers are oppressed in the sense that everybody who goes to work is making somebody else rich, and you barely get your share.