Lauren Sarvis

She can already feel the physical effects of work on her body at twenty-four. She wonders if it is too late to get an education and a profession.

"Go get some schooling." My mother always told me that before, but I wouldn't listen. I didn't want to go to school. In high school I hung around with the skippers and quit in eleventh grade to take a job as a dishwasher. I had a little bit of a taste of money and independence, but went back to school in my senior year for my mother's sake. Then I quit again to work in a nursing home. Finally, I finished up the few credits I needed to graduate in night school.

My mother was a teacher up in Granite Falls. She is divorced and I admire her for being able to be on her own. She's educated, had her job, and we never would have made it without her. Her independence was something for me to look up to. But I should have listened to her about my going to school. Now I've really learned my lesson.

After school, I worked in any job I could get. One of them was in a wood mill in nineteen seventy-six. That was a man's job actually. A woman could do it, but at a woman's wage. I mean no man would have worked for that low wage. I was making three dollars an hour when I started and with no benefits. At first I thought my boss was a really nice person, really terrific, just partly because I gave him credit for giving me the job. That turned out to be the biggest joke.
Laura Sarvis, sawyer/bench worker

I sawed shake ridge, packed shake, and stapled shakes together. Sometimes I would pack shakes onto pallets, which would then be put into railroad cars. To do that I would throw the bundles above my head about eleven feet high. I would have to jump back six feet and run and pitch them way up in the air. I did that for about two weeks. My boss was just really happy that I was doing this. I thought I was a real toughie until I put my back out and was off work for two days. That's what comes from trying to prove yourself.

My boss was a dirty old man and got into making comments. Oh, well, maybe I brought it on myself. I had a thing around my license plate that said, "Beer Drinkers Make Better Lovers." And my boss came up to me one time and said, "Oh, is that true?" I'm sure if I had gone for it, he would have. I know for a fact he ended up shacking up with one of the girls in a motel for about two weeks. That girl was the only one getting medical. Why would she have all these benefits if the rest of us didn't? She had two kids and depended on him. There's a lot of places where a man can put a woman in a position where she has to depend on him and then take advantage of it.

Anyhow, at the mill the boss had his nailing guns illegally wired. It is supposed to be set so you hit the piece of wood and pull the trigger and you shoot about a three-inch nail with hooks into the wood. So we could work faster, he had the triggers wired back, so all you had to do was bump into it and it would shoot a nail into your hand or arm. This happened about three times down there. When it happened to one of my good girl friends, I got pissed off. She was in a state of shock and I took her to the hospital. Her car was still at work and the boss said he would pick her up from the hospital. We waited for two hours for him to show up. All the time she kept on throwing up in the waiting room. When I called down to the shop, all he said was, "Oh, I forgot. I'm sorry." Finally, I ended up driving her back to her car and my boy friend drove my car home while I drove her home.
On the way we stopped off at the pharmacy, and it just hit me. I thought, "Something’s gotta be done about this place!" Two weeks later I called up the union.

Well, I started talking my ear off about the union. It was funny because a lot of the girls thought the boss was terrific. He really had them twisted around his finger, called them "Baby" and all of this stuff. They thought it was terrific to be getting three fifty an hour. What happened was that we started to get really bitter. One guy that was for the union got really mad, lost his temper, and walked out. Then he got fired. My brother, who was for the union, got another job and left. One girl left for school. And I knew we were gonna lose. I just had this feeling, because it was such a small shop. Then I got laid off, and when I came back in on the day of the vote I could see the fear in the people. Some of the girls who were afraid to say anything were afraid something would happen to them. He used me as an example and sure enough we lost the vote. That boss made me sick. He had the biggest shit-eating grin you've ever seen on his face. I couldn't face the people. How could they be so stupid to let somebody like that rule their lives?

I quit and went up to a shingle mill in Granite Falls to try and get on. When I put my application in, the secretary goes, "Well, we don't need anybody in the office."

I had on my logger boots and big burly sweater and said, "I'm not applying for the office job. I'm applying to go out in the mill." To show I could do it, I went out there and graded shingles and bundled them up and drove a forklift around. Then I ran the saw, cutting off the bad areas on the shingles to get the best parts possible. I went up to the boss, but he said they didn't need anyone right then. But I came back every other day for a good three weeks and never got hired.

There wasn't one woman out there among those four hundred guys working for him. The union rep was the same man I had tried organizing with at the other place, so I went and talked
Laura Sarvis, sawyer/bench worker

with him. He said I could go to the EEOC and make them hire a woman, but they wouldn't hire me. They'd turn around and hire another woman.

In some ways the ERA had ruined it because there's a lot of women out there that bitch and bitch that they're not getting paid as much as the guys, or they wanna do a guy's job. A lot of these women ruin it for the women who really deserve it. When they get the job, they turn around and say, "Well, I can't do this. Will you do this for me?" That infuriates the guys and I can't blame them, but everybody deserves a chance. That's all I want—if I can do the job, why not give it to me?

Finally, I gave up there and got a job at a Boeing subcontractor. I used a router a little bit in high school, so I kinda lied and said I knew how to use one. In benchwork there's different plans for different parts. We must have had thirty different parts, so you had to be careful and know what you were doing. You can't just hand a part to somebody and tell them to saw the tabs off. Chances are, if you're not watching, they might saw off the wrong tabs and ruin the whole part. You had to know which cutters to use and be able to hold tolerances within one one-hundredth or two one-hundredths of an inch sometimes.

Because of boredom I tried to learn as much as I could, and I'd do some of the weird kind of stuff. I liked getting up on top of these great big parts that were thirty feet long and drilling on them. Nobody else wanted to get that dirty and greasy and push all that heavy stuff around.

One time when I was working nights they hired a guy to work on the bench, which was pretty unusual. They usually don't start guys out on the bench because that's pretty much the girls' work. So one night we were talking while I was showing him how to do different stuff, and he said they were thinking about making him supervisor on the bench at night. I looked at him, and I go, "Have you ever worked on the bench before?"

He said, "No." And I was pissed, because if anybody's gonna
be supervisor it’s gonna be my girlfriend, Sue, or me, because we have seniority. Talk about a primo example of male chauvinism. They finally gave it to another guy who couldn’t supervise worth shit. He handed a guy a router once with it set at fifteen thousand—way too high.

Another thing that irked me was they had an area called material prep. They were all men and would prep the material before it would go out for shipping over to Boeing. Those guys stood around with their finger up their noses half of the time, and it made me so mad. Later I found out they had a system where two guys would take ten minutes off while the other worked and then they’d switch. It bothered me because here we were getting dirty, working up a sweat, and they were so slack.

The boss was on a real ego trip. He liked the girls to kind of feather up to him, and sometimes women will do that to get up in a job. Sometimes, maybe the way the world is, we’re almost put in that position. It makes me feel bad to see women working there that were forty years old and know they could be out the door at a moment’s notice just because a boss got ruffled a little bit. A lot of males like to throw their authority around because they like to scare people. I don’t like working for shops like that. When I quit my boss wasn’t upset or nothing. He knew I wouldn’t kiss his ass, so why should he keep me around?

After that I worked in a couple other mills and got on at another Boeing subcontractor. Because I was experienced I started out at four dollars and fifty cents an hour on the bench. It was a small shop with only about twelve people all together. It was really monotonous doing the same parts all day long. They were mostly just parts of the frame of the inside of the airplane. It was a lot dirtier and oilier. When I walked out of there at night, I could have slid all the way home if I wanted to. I’d rather eat a piece of wood than a piece of aluminum. That’s what it was like because you’d get it in your nose and it was terrible.

The first eight months or so weren’t so bad. Then I started
noticing the hours were pretty long, nine a day. The boss would just as soon pay you for nine hours with shitty wages. You work that hour of overtime and everybody thought it was the world. You get to depend on the overtime.

A lot of things started building up for people. Like a guy who worked there for two years was making six bucks an hour and they hire somebody with no experience at five fifty an hour. There was no system for raises. You had to ask for them. Then they came out with this bonus system where we got a percentage of however much we averaged out that year in January. That added up to a hundred and fifty or two hundred dollars for a lot of people, depending on how many days they put in. Then they took that away by saying we had done six percent less work. We all knew we had done as much work, but how could we prove it? About the same time they bought a window company and started buying a lot of expensive equipment for the other building. By this time we were getting pretty mad. When they cut the medical plan to a lot cheaper one, we started thinking about going to a union. The one we chose was District 751 Machinists Union. We kept all this really secret because there were people that would kiss ass in order to be in good with the company. We never told them, but there were eight of us that were pretty strong for it.

The pressure on people before the election was terrible. The company had my friend pegged as one of the union people, so when they saw me talking to him out front they started looking at me suspiciously. When I went to my car the boss would stand behind a building and watch me. He'd glare at me if I talked to anyone. Then the supervisor went around talking to people during working hours trying to find out how they would vote. They gave one guy a raise and said, "We're not giving this to you because of the union. We want to make this very clear." They were just all of a sudden being nicey-nice. When one guy got burned and went to the hospital, they were all of a sudden going
up to check on him. They promised the inspector all kinds of things.

After the election the inspector told me, "Laura, they used me. All of the promises are forgotten. They don't even talk to me." It hurt his feelings.

I said, "Well, what do you expect? You should have known all along."

When it came to the vote they came up with seventeen, not twelve people, for the bargaining unit. I was an observer and challenged three. We won the challenges and the election.

The next day I left on my vacation. I went down the Oregon coast on a motorcycle with my boyfriend. It was during the hot spell and we had a really good time.

When I returned to work the boss would stand in the office glaring at me while I worked. About a month later I missed a day and called in sick. The next week I missed another day so he fired me. There were several others with worse attendance than me, so I went to the union. We filed unfair labor charges on the union. I'm going through them right now and don't know how they'll come out. It is my word against theirs. Also, of the two people I want to testify for me, one of them is the inspector, and he does need the job. It makes me feel humiliated, because I started out at the bottom and was bringing in like two hundred twenty-five dollars a week, which isn't bad for a girl. It's also hard for me because I stuck my neck out, and they're not willing to stick their neck out for me. I'm just getting sick of this kind of work. I want to go to school and get into something else.

A week after I was fired, the company laid everybody off. I feel they'll hang on by the skin of their teeth until things pick up. They say it is because of lack of work, but this last week they were working twelve-hour days to get out an order. That's something I've never seen that place do before. I feel bad for the people that hung in there. We had a strong group and everybody
stuck together. I don’t know the exact procedure, but I think after a year they can hire everybody back as non-union.

When I first walked into this kind of work, I was very self-confident. I thought three dollars an hour was terrific. Since then I’ve been beaten down. I’m unemployed now. Times are really expensive. I have four years’ experience and can’t get a job. Not working, being broke in a man’s world, has bothered me a lot. I’m gonna have to get an education or something because I don’t want to have to work under a man again. It should be both our worlds. Every shop I’ve worked in the women worked their asses off more than anybody else did because no man would work for three dollars or three fifty an hour.

The work has started to take a toll in the last year. I don’t feel healthy and sometimes I find myself feeling very inferior. When I get off work I look like a rag. I want to be a lady once in a while. Also when you’re working, you don’t eat right a lot of times. You don’t have time to maybe eat breakfast, or the night before you’re too tired to pack a lunch, so you eat off the “garbage” truck. If you tell a doctor you’re tired, he’ll say eat right and you’ll feel fine. But a lot of nights after work I would just lay right down on the couch in my dirty clothes and be lucky if I got up five hours later. It is taking a toll on me. If I knew other women thinking about doing this kind of work, I’d tell them my story first, and then send them to a psychiatrist if they still wanted to do it.