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BRAVE NEW WORLD

GREEN COLLARS

by David Owen

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Aspiring ironworkers in New York City must complete a three-year apprenticeship. They take classes two evenings a week and on occasional Saturdays, and they spend most of the third year practicing things like arc-welding single-V butt joints and slicing through inch-thick steel plates with oxyacetylene torches. One recent Wednesday evening, approximately two hundred of them arrived at the training center of Locals 40 and 361, on Thirty-sixth Street in Astoria, and encountered a scene of a type that has gladdened students' hearts since the time of Thomas Edison: a classroom furnished with a screen and a movie projector. It was Earth Day, and in its observance the apprentices were going to be shown "The Greening of Southie," a documentary about the construction of an environmentally friendly luxury apartment building in an old working-class neighborhood in Boston. Some of the third-year students were feeling nervous—the city's licensing exam for welders was a week away, leaving them little time for last-minute practice in the center's welding booths, which resemble oversized shower stalls—but few could have been as nervous as Ian Cheney, who had directed the film and agreed to introduce it. Making a movie about green construction is one thing; screening it for actual construction workers is another. Cheney wasn't wearing steel-toed boots, a do-rag, or a split cowhide welding jacket, and his arms and neck were neither bulging with muscles nor heavily tattooed, and he had to warn the ironworkers that they might see people in the film wearing Boston Red Sox insignia. "If that's shocking to you," he said, "just close your eyes."

In one of the movie's opening sequences, a foreman explains to a roomful of workers that, for environmental reasons, smoking will be prohibited, even during construction—and, as he says this, the workers look less like workers than like third-year acting apprentices who have mastered a variety of techniques for conveying bemused incredulity. As the project proceeds, however, many of them become converts, or semi-converts—"I believe that shit is organic," a roofer says as he spreads hot black glop. An ironworker named Bob Gottlich, who has so many earrings in his left ear that its rim looks like a riveting exercise, says that, before the project began, "I never heard about a green building," but that turning junked cars into steel beams makes obvious sense. A dreadlocked laborer named Wayne Phillips—"It never really come across my mind to give the environment a good deep study"—brings his teen-aged daughter to the building so that she can see the water-saving dual-flush toilets. Carrie Mowbray, a woman who works for the company that hauls construction waste from the site, says she once thought that trying to be green was "dorky," but that she has come around, and she has now had an image of a roll-out truck tattooed on her rear end—which she proves by pulling down the waistband of her jeans, earning appreciative applause from the apprentices.

When the movie ended, Cheney asked for comments, and (he explained later) was pleasantly surprised. "I noticed there are a lot of imports," one apprentice said, referring to the fact that the project's architect, despite a supposed preference for local materials, had specified bamboo flooring from China, hardwood decking from Bolivia, and plumbing fixtures from Australia. Another apprentice said, "I didn't see any passive solar on that building." A third wondered whether there were any moisture-related issues involved in replacing fiberglass insulation with recycled cotton. A fourth asked about the comparative environmental impact of steel versus concrete, giving Cheney an opportunity to describe steel, which is easy to remelt and reuse, as "a quintessential green material." Several ironworkers hung around afterward. Joseph Glynn, a second-year apprentice—"I learned to weld in the Navy, and I joined the union through a program called

Helmets to Hardhats”—followed up on the discussion of imports by describing the black exhaust smoke that is emitted by oceangoing vessels, most of which are powered by a form of petroleum called residual fuel oil.

Cheney had brought a pile of stickers printed with the title of his film and the slogan “Green and Proud,” and he invited the ironworkers to affix them to their hard hats. Within ten minutes, all the stickers were gone. An instructor explained that ironworkers are enthusiastic collectors not only of stickers but of pins. Bryan Brady II, the director of training for Locals 40 and 361, said, “The future is going to be a lot different than it is now.” ♦

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