

## Local 34

Pile Drivers: Extreme Construction

by Richard Bermack,

Contributing Writer

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Member Interviews below...

Pile Drivers Local 34 working for Manson Construction at the Port of Oakland

Janiu Animashaun

#### Apprentice Pile Driver

When I came here, I wanted to get a skill and work in the trades. I was a cabinet maker in Africa, but this requires a lot more skill. I like it. I'm learning how to build bridges and docks. What I'm doing today is digging out the form so they can put in the rail. We have to make everything look nice and perfect.

Michael Bronsert

#### Journeyman

It's good hard work and satisfying. When you are finished with a project, you can always look back at it. I worked on the Sky Way project of the new Bay Bridge for a while. When my daughter gets old enough to drive across it, she will be able to tell her friends, "Hey, my daddy helped build this thing." I set the footings and stripped the pier cables while I was 150 feet in the air, hooked on a lanyard. Was I scared? Absolutely! It was scary, but fun. Fear is what you feel before you take that first step. After that, it's a great feeling. In this job you build it with your hands. And when we're done with the concrete, we take apart the forms so we get to see what we built. I've been working in this area since 2000. I worked on docks 57, 22, 32, and over on the bridge. When I got out here, there wasn't much here. When you leave, it's a whole new thing.

Audrey Hudson

#### Journeywoman

This is an exciting day to be a pile driver. Pile driving entails a lot of different types of work, really big things to small things. Today we are working on a very small project, but it has a big impact. We are cleaning a form. Normally you put oil on it so the concrete won't stick, but the type of work we're doing today, we can't use oil. So we have to make it nice and clean by hand--sand paper and elbows. It has to be very clean, because wire cable is going to go down in the channel we're creating, and it has to be able to roll freely back and forth. What we do is peel back the front row of the deck, yank out the old pile. Then these big muncher machines come and munch it up, and a

barge comes to take it away. We put in a new row of pile and put back the deck, and it is all secure for even bigger giant cranes to roll on down. When I first applied for a pile driver job in Los Angeles, about eight years ago, I thought it was about driving, and I brought my DMV papers. After 15 minutes, I realized what they meant by driving pile. I got sent out with 9 journeymen, and I was the only female. They told me to go where this guy was chopping allthread with a chop saw and all kinds of sparks were flying. I thought my hair was going to catch on fire. That first week they really put me through the wringer. They made me carry their stuff, walking on the scaffolding, while they were jumping up and down trying to make me fall, but they got me ready. Then at the end of the week they said, "You did all right, girl. You are going to be a pile butt." The other day I put together a 225-ton crane. Another day I went out on a barge driving jet pile on the water like the hard-core big boys. (Note: Pile Drivers Local 34 wants to make it clear that the initiation behavior Hudson describes would not be tolerated by the union in Oakland.)

Rufus Lazarus

Journeyman Welder

It's something different all the time. We hardly ever do the same thing twice. Today I'm putting rails together, next week I might be working on a crane, and the week after that I might be doing piles. It's challenging welding out here. Everything is so diverse. Like this rail: one day the iron's rusty, the next day shining smooth. You've got to prep right before you weld it each time because of the sea air. We don't weld this with stick. You make a mold around it. Then you put a heater in to get it to 520 degrees and then set off calarite. It burns to 3800 degrees and makes a 1-inch weld in 6 seconds. You can't have any water in the mold or it will expand so fast it will blow up, with the equivalent force of 2 sticks of dynamite. It would annihilate everyone standing here. I have to make everyone stand back, but it's only dangerous for 30 seconds. I've been doing this for over 30 years, and I wouldn't want to do anything else.

Daxz Sweeney

Journeymen Pile Driver

I enjoy the people and the camaraderie. Out here, you really look out for the other guy. It goes beyond a job, we're a family. I also love the technical part of the job. I'm about the numbers and trying to do a good job, working with the cranes to calculate the weight and swing angles, critical stress, how far in the ground to go for support, how to do the rigging. I eat all that up. I love it. How did I pick the job? A buddy of mine didn't want to go to college. He says to me, "This guy down the street is hiring. I don't know what it is, but it's big frames and makes a lot of noise."

Dennis Garland Foreman

I started as a pile butt almost when Eisenhower was president. Well, maybe not quite that long ago, but those were different times. Back then you hardly ever wore safety belts; if you asked the boss, he would look at you cross-eyed. Now putting on a safety belt, harnesses, eye protection and ear plugs is automatic. My dad was a pile driver and he got killed in a barge, so safety is number one for me. I've got a good reputation; very few people have ever gotten hurt working for me. I have about 28 out here on this project. My goal: every one goes home

the same way they came. Team work is key. You can't build anything by yourself, and the union helps make it all work. Another thing, we don't yell at people. When I started, if you did something wrong they yelled at you. Now they talk to you. It works better. Yelling isn't the answer.