

Local 23

by Michael Araujo

He goes over the list with me one more time—cigarette dangling from his mouth. He was small, hunched, his skin pulled tight on his skull, not an ounce of fat on him, and no telling his age; he was old, maybe—always wore a tattered winter coat, no matter the weather. It was another big call—120 workers in all—some of them Journeymen, a few apprentices, and 200+ overhires hoping to get work for the day, a 4-hour minimum, and a meal. Managing this was hard, very hard. There were regulars of course, solid hands, older skilled, sometimes they brought their sons or daughters to try to earn some pay for the family. Joe kept his list close—he knew who would work, who was drunk but had a place, who was high. He kept the names and their stories. 150 shifts to fill that day, a bad economy, more than 200 show up with hope and empty bellies. Joe had to balance what was right, but he knew that there would be disappointment, some workers who would be passed over again and again. They would travel to the next city on the tour hoping again for the slot.

It was cold in the loading area. The wind ripped through the loading area. The workers bundled as warm as they could. Huddled together in little groups, talking about the last show they worked on, or how they got passed over, how they hoped to get picked for apprenticeship someday. Too early for the sun; the February cold

was particularly cruel. The quick fading smoke from the breath blending in with the long-lasting smoke of the cigarettes. Holding their coffees with two hands and dancing from foot to foot for warmth. Standing by the loading doors which rattle loudly with every wind, they would talk about how they hoped this show had 30 or 40 trucks, and that they heard there were as many as 20 positions for the show. These workers weren't Journeymen, or apprentices, or cardholders of any kind so they gathered an hour before the call time, hoping the shape up would shape up for them.

Joe and I stood in the empty arena. Sometimes he would stand in the darkened space smoking, taking in the last hour to go over his list, to make sure it was right. I gave him space, I checked that the office was locked, and that the show call had qualified people for what this show wanted—they were all different. Joe left me to this quiet; no jokes now, no bullshitting about the old days. This time was a precious minute. Our day starts early before the first of the overhires show up—5 a.m., make the list. Our day wouldn't end until the show was over, and the last truck had left, and the last of the journeymen riggers was done with their adrenaline-fueled chatter. Our day ended at 4 a.m. 23 hours: ½ hour for breakfast, ½ hour for lunch, ½ hour for dinner. The work loading in a show was

dangerous. It required a vast array of skills. From truck loaders—there would be 12 on this show, paid by the truck to motivate speed—2 forklift operators, 30 pushers—this was the least desirable job, very cold and chaotic—the push for this show was almost 100 yards, and a pusher may make more than 100 round trips. 20 lighting techs, 15 sound techs—the second least wanted job—5 pyrotechs, 15 props, 10 costume, and 18 riggers who work in the high steel. This show had 35 trucks and had to be loaded, built, and ready for sound and light check in 4 hours. Joe needed his time to keep it straight; there were only 15 minutes to break the workers into crews. Joe could handle it.

I would help coordinate the timing and arrival of the trucks—2 loaders per truck meant 4 trucks could be hand-unloaded, and 2 trucks unloaded with the forks. I sketch out the loading apron, give it to Joe for approval, he nods—dropping ash on my notebook. It's 6:45. The first 4 trucks will be getting off the highway; now they were 10 minutes away, the last trucks about an hour—right on time. Joe passes me a smoke. I bend to his lighter, take a drag. Joe smiles. He hands me his list. I look it over. I've learned to read his scribbles—the tiny writing of 80 names and 40 empty spaces. That's what today is 40. 40 workers who are waiting in the cold, 80 workers who will go to a home—if they have one—

without any pay today. Maybe they have the money for gas to make it to Worcester the next stop for the show. I can handle the 40.

We walk across the empty arena floor to the loading door; it's the last minutes. I hear the first truck pull up. Joe steps up to the middle of the door, looks at me, I throw the door open—the cold air blasts up. Joe without removing the cigarette from his mouth Yells out.

*ALRIGHT, BROTHERS—LINE UP
AND LET'S GO TO WORK!*

