

Building Bridges 2017: The First U. S. Tradeswoman Delegation in India

The following is the extended personal account of Local 3 Joint Apprenticeship Coordinator (JAC) Holly Brown's journey to India this year to learn about the country's labor culture for women and improve working conditions there. The condensed article was published in the May 2017 edition of Engineers News.

On Jan. 16, 15 U.S. delegates were in New Delhi from all over the United States, 14 women and one man. They included journeywomen, employers, Building Trades members, Retirees, apprentices and women in union positions. All were active with their union or other organizations that supported women, minorities or their communities.

We came from Missouri, Michigan, Kansas, Massachusettes and California. We were Operators, Carpenters, Sheet Metal Workers, Electricians, Laborers and a bus driver. I was with Operating Engineers Local 3 Joint Apprenticeship Training Center (JATC) Northern California and Journeywoman Kelly McCleen was with Operating Engineers Local 101 Kansas.

We stayed in a hostel. It was two to a room and in the heart of the city with all the hustle and bustle.

First, we went to the VV Giri National Labor Institute in Noida for a two-day conference. The inaugural address was done by Sri Rajeev Arora from joint labor and employment, government of India. We had discussions and dialogue with government, trade unions, civil social organizations, the Academy, senior organization facilities members and officers. The U.S. delegation shared their experiences and successes being skilled union tradeswomen. We talked about equal pay and equal training for women and men. We all talked about our careers, how we got started and struggles with harassment.

We learned that construction in India is the largest non-agricultural form of employment. Construction workers' normal workday is 12 hours. Over 90 percent of construction workers are classified as informal, where they are paid cash for their work. Two young women came to the conference and were the only construction workers in attendance. We gave them safety posters and some financial support. We learned that they make about 250 to 300 rupees a day, which would be equivalent to about \$3.67 or \$4.50. Women only did the labor and were not taught any skills. They made less than men. Women were responsible for all household duties and looking after the children. Sometimes their pay went to their husbands that they were working with. Most workers do not even know who they are working for and are not put on the working books, so they are not entitled to social benefits. We talked about harassment, cultural perceptions, policies and implementations.

India is good about writing policy but not good with enforcement. There are a lot of similarities in both countries (U.S. and India): unequal pay for women, trouble enforcing policies, harassment, day care issues, cultural perceptions about women not being able to lead and not being smart or strong enough. India is working on getting construction workers benefits and a pension. They are getting the word out to the union members.

The conference was more than I could've hoped for, for we all were a part of it. Dr. Susan Moir did a tremendous job organizing every detail.

The next morning, we visited Naka, where construction workers wait for contractors to pick them up for work. We were able to spend time with 10 women in construction. We had them come on the bus, because we were surrounded by more than 200 male workers and paid the women their wages for the day. Most had not worked for several months. Most of the women were single, because their husbands died. Most construction was at a standstill due to demonetization of money and the change in currency. The last thing we did that day was visit the Taj Mahal – what an incredible feat of engineering and craftsmanship.

On Jan. 22, we went to Mumbai, also known as Bombay, for a conference with the TISS Institute of Social Science. The meeting was with union advocates, academics and Mumbai and Pune-based stockholders. We presented them with construction health and safety posters that were made in the Hindi language. We focused on gender work and development of women in the construction industry. Our biggest focus was why women can't be Masons. When fully trained to work, there is work for them.

We did a tour of Mumbai and then visited a mobile crèche. This is an onsite daycare center for children on construction sites and is funded by donations. Children are given nutrition, seen by doctors and given basic skills for school and hygiene. If this is not in place, the kids are on the jobsites or strapped to their mothers' backs. Most children are malnourished and do not have access to school. Their families come from villages to the cities. The teachers were so amazing with the children.

On Jan. 27, we traveled to Chennai. In the slums, most people lived in an 8 X 10 room with their entire family without water or plumbing inside the homes. We met a woman who employed over 200 people for domestic work from the slums, the godmother of women's organizing and construction in India who has been organizing since 1970. This was truly an amazing experience and a phenomenal community with strength and heart. I just loved the kids with their big smiles on their faces. Once again we stayed in a hostel. Even these conditions were better than half the population.

Next, we visited a labor camp with some living in makeshift housing. They could not vote, even though some had been there for 10 years. (They must have an address to vote.) Children ran around without diapers. They were working on a project nearby. We talked to them about our trades. Then we visited a worksite in Pondicherry. The women came out to meet us, even though they were not working. Most were Mason helpers, and some were on paving crews. We talked about our trades. One of the male workers said he would teach a few women to be Masons. The union fed the entire group.

At some of the smaller meetings, workers spoke three different languages, so interpreting back and forth was very frustrating, just some of the hurdles they face.

Construction in India seems to be a few steps behind the U.S. Most construction was done by hand, digging trenches, and concrete was hoisted by buckets with pulleys. Little, if any Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was used, and most people were barefoot or wore sandals, while animals and kids were on the construction sites. There were hardly any safety vests, glasses, earplugs or lung protection. Women were working in their saris. Thank God we have OSHA! I will never complain again.

Nothing prepared me for what I would see in India. The sights, the loud sounds, the colors of the women's clothing and people everywhere. The roads were so busy, crowded with vehicles and people (four to a motorcycle was not uncommon). There were animals pulling carts, cows, dogs wandering around and horns honking constantly. I saw rickshaws, tok toks, scooters and people pushing carts. It was people just trying to exist and survive with little or nothing. There were so many homeless and makeshift shelters. There's not enough food or jobs to go around. The animals even looked thin. They charge money to use the restrooms, so most people go outside, since they cannot afford it. I only saw two women driving; most were on scooters. The concept of a caste system seemed so socially unjust. I had many unexpected emotions. It seemed like 100 years behind and yet modern, all at once. There were so many poor people. I come away from this experience humbled, and I am more committed to fighting for equality for women worldwide.

The level of hospitality and openness from the Indian people was wonderful. These are amazing and resilient people who go about their lives working hard.

Our group raised over \$30,000 in funds. This was to help pay for inter-flight tickets, rooms, food, vans, etc. We gave money to various groups to help with women in construction: unions, mobile crèches, TISS, VV Giri National Labor Institute, Archana Women's Center and others. We were not paid to attend this event; we all bought our own tickets and used our own time to be part of this life-changing effort!

What made me interested in this project was a global breakout session from Women Build the Nation in Chicago. I saw a picture of a woman carrying bricks on her head with her baby on her back.

Thanks to those involved for taking the time in showing us the parks, museums, temples, ocean, slums and the city. You were a big help to us so we could understand the culture.

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