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SF Building Trades Plan For The Next Disaster-Unions Take Lead in Preparation

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History of a Plan for Disaster Response

Building Trades workers and Fire Fighters know what happened, even if few members of the general public know. As an ironworker told it to me, he was working across the Hudson from Manhattan in New Jersey on 11 September 2001. He and others on his job watched the towers collapse. They left the job with their tools, made their way to the docks, hitched a ride with a willing tugboat captain, and headed straight to Ground Zero..

[Mike Theriault] His was not the only jobsite to empty. As most New Yorkers fled the scene of the attack, Building Trades workers headed toward it. They knew that their skills and tools would be needed in any rescue effort after a major structure collapse. The Fire Fighters, too, knew this and welcomed their help.

But through no fault of their own the Building Trades workers did not arrive in any organized way. They had to sort out chains of command and division of tasks on the spot. Many did not know each other's moves, as members of a crew that had trained together would. Nor did they have the advantage of working in crews to which heavy equipment, burning rigs, and so on had been assigned in advance. Given the thoroughness of the devastation wrought by the day's attacks, the delays that would inevitably have resulted from this disorganization may not have resulted in any failure to reach survivors, but it is easy to see how in other such emergencies they could.

Another result of the disorganization was that workers arrived and worked a long while without protective equipment. By some accounts, even when protective equipment did come it was at first designated for "first responders" alone and could be obtained for Building Trades workers only through ruses. The disorganization may yet prove deadly, then, as the effects of the smoke and dust to which they were exposed play out in the bodies of those workers, as is apparently happening now.

After the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake there was some discussion in the general membership meetings of my own local, Iron Workers 377, on developing a registry of skilled riggers to respond in the event of major structure collapses such as we had seen on the Bay Bridge and the Cypress Structure. If those discussions were conveyed to the City, it did nothing at that time. The discussions resumed after the attacks in New York. Shortly after I took office as Secretary-Treasurer of the San Francisco Building and Construction Trades Council in April 2005 I contacted Operating Engineers Local 3, Iron Workers Local 377, and San Francisco Fire Fighters Local 798, and we began meeting to discuss a plan for joint response in the event of a major

disaster or attack, especially involving structure collapse. We sketched out a few features of the plan. The Fire Fighters expressed a need for expertise in shoring buildings in danger of collapse, and so to broaden the pool of such expertise we brought Carpenters Local 22 into the meetings, and they in turn brought representatives from Pile Drivers Local 34.

For six weeks in the fall of 2006 an intern with the Coro Foundation Fellows Program in Public Affairs, Sarah Ihmoud, was working with the Council. At the same time another Coro fellow, Kathryn Bailey, was working with Fire Fighters Local 798. We and the Fire Fighters decided to have our Coro interns, both recent college graduates with leadership training, coordinate another series of meetings between the Trades and the Fire Fighters to flesh out the joint emergency response plan. Then we would have them prepare a presentation to the City.

The plan that resulted clarified chains of command. It recommended establishment of registries of heavy equipment and skilled workers. It discussed certifications for those workers. It suggested staging areas and communication methods. It spoke of pre-positioning of burning rigs and other equipment and materials. It asked that Building Trades workers on the registries be pre-supplied with protective equipment. It outlined how joint Building Trades - Fire Fighters training exercises could be held. It told of how apprenticeship curriculum could be derived from lessons learned in those exercises.

On our behalf and with representatives of all the unions involved present, the Coro interns presented the plan in early October 2006, to the Mayor's then-chief of staff, Steve Kawa, to Laura Phillips, the director of the City's Department of Emergency Management, and to other City officials. Although Mr. Kawa asked hard questions, the response was very favorable. At Mr. Kawa's request, I met next by myself with Amy Lee and Ray Lui of the Department of Building Inspection. Again, the response was favorable; Mr. Lui in particular acknowledged that the plan addressed needs that he himself had observed. Ms. Lee said that a meeting among department heads to discuss the plan was being scheduled.

We gave a copy of the presentation to the Center to Protect Workers' Rights of the Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO, and they offered to provide a "train-the-trainer" class on disaster response education.

Naïvely, we in the Building Trades and Firefighters believed that the City would be so enthused by a plan that was at once so practical and addressed such a clear need that it would announce our cooperative effort to implement the plan 17 October, the anniversary of the Loma Prieta earthquake. We didn't go to the press with it ourselves because we wanted the City administration to be able to take credit for it. 17 October approached, came, went, and the City said nothing. The meeting between department heads never took place. Months went by. Steve Kawa left and was replaced as mayoral chief of staff by Phil Ginsburg. Amy Lee left and was replaced as director of the Department of Building Inspection by Isam Hasenin.

Meanwhile in Seattle Building Trades workers had begun joint training exercises with Fire Fighters.

Early this year I began talking about the plan to Phil Ginsburg. We arranged a personal meeting in early April to discuss it. After I presented it to him, he admitted that the plan made sense but pointed out that some details might have to be changed to accord with systems already in place. I assured him that we could be flexible, that our commitment was to produce something that worked. He called Laura Phillips at the Department of Emergency Management and suggested that she arrange a public announcement of our cooperative effort on 18 April, anniversary of the 1906 earthquake and fire. He also suggested that we arrange follow-up meetings to begin working on any necessary revisions of the plan and on its implementation.

Just before 18 April, I was told that other events scheduled for that day precluded our public announcement.

In e-mails between myself and employees of the Department of Emergency Management in mid-April, I was told that the first two weeks of May were "pretty free" for follow-up meetings and I was asked to provide possible dates and times and to fax a copy of our **October 2006** presentation. I fulfilled both requests 19 April.

As I write this column, we are in the second week of May and I have received no notification of a follow-up meeting.

Building Trades workers know that we and our predecessors have done high-quality work in San Francisco construction. We know also, however, that materials and processes have changed over the years. So have engineers' understandings of the requirements of building safely in seismic areas. We know that San Francisco is a world-famous city with world-renowned structures, and that this makes us vulnerable to the attacks of those seeking a perverse renown. An hourglass has been turned over. We don't know how many grains of sand it holds or how fast they flow. We do know that when the last grain falls, some of our good work may come down.

We have presented a plan to help in the most essential way when this happens. Building Trades workers are ready to do their part.

Now it's the City's turn.

After City officials were provided in advance with the text of this column, a representative of the Department of Emergency Management contacted me with dates and times in late May and early June for follow-up meetings. I have responded to her. We will keep our readers apprised of our progress.

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