

# 'Work!' Brings Cheers at Local 194's Hiring Hall

By Neil Henry

Washington Post Staff Writer

"All right, you lousy, no-good, no-count, know *nothin'* sons of bitches," Cockeye barked, stepping over Sam's rusty bucket, shutting off a television game show with a quick flick of his thumb and facing the crowd of unemployed workers who glanced up from their poker hands in the Paca Street union hall and listened for the rest of what their grizzled labor leader had to say this rainy morning.

"We gots work," Cockeye growled and the men all cheered because it had been quite a while since the

last time they heard Cockeye say those words and even longer since they saw the old man in such a mood, something they would call fine bojo poking fetter.

"Baltimore Gas and Electric," he went on after pausing, "need 20 men tomorrow bright and early."

Jimmy and I were finally lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time. For three hard weeks Jimmy, a portly man in his 30s, had searched unsuccessfully for work in Baltimore. Both of us were staying at the Helping-Up mission by night and bouncing from labor pool to labor pool by day.

We meandered over to manual laborers union Local 194 that morning to use the bathroom and watch television and found ourselves instead signing up for work with Cockeye — and well-paying union work, at that. It would be my first job down and out as a homeless derelict and it came after several rude rejections and a week of tedium.

In previous days I inquired for work at more than a dozen establishments around Baltimore including the Lexington Street fruit and vegetable market, the Wholesale Fish Warehouse and several depart-

ment stores. I was rejected each time, usually politely, occasionally gruffly, and I discovered that my appearance was my greatest drawback.

By now I was close to two weeks into this assignment. I had showered at the mission but my clothes smelled foul and stubbles of hair were beginning to spread on my face. My clothes absorbed my own perspiration, as well as the faint sweet-sickly odors of urine and old sweat emitted by sheets and blankets at the mission. I was getting little sleep because of the cold at

See **WORKING**, A6, Col. 1

PART 3

# DOWN & OUT

*Waiting for work with Jimmy and Cockeye, and cleaning up for Baltimore Gas and Electric.*

# DOWN & OUT

WORKING, From A1

night, and my eyes were turning red. I had developed a painfully sore nerve in my left foot and was limping badly. I was not a presentable sight.

In a department store one day two elderly shoppers chose not to ride the same elevator with me. Drugstore and bus station security guards kept their eyes pinned on me, even followed me up and down aisles and stairways. A policeman on horseback one morning prodded me along with a nightstick when he came across me looking at a haberdashery window display.

"Come back when they're open," he said, "if you want something."

One afternoon I stopped in at a Mercedes new car lot after noticing a help-wanted sign on the front window. I went inside and asked a man in horned rim glasses about the job.

"It's washing cars," he said, "think you can handle that?"

I replied yes and in the course of the short question-and-answer session that followed I told him I was staying at a mission downtown. He showed me the door and told me to come back, "when your feet are planted better."

Whatever dignity I felt at the beginning of this journey had eroded to a point where I felt comfortable only with other bums. For better or worse, I knew I had succeeded in this physical metamorphosis when an old man carrying shopping bags stopped me on The Block and whispered, "Which way's the mission, bud?"

Looking for work down and out was often an exercise in humiliation, so I joined the routines of other downtown men who knew that the best places to land work and salvage a bit of dignity in the process were the labor pools—temporary employment agencies for unskilled men.

Baltimore has about a half-dozen labor pools, most of them clustered on the squalid fringe of downtown, west of the Trailways bus station, on Eutaw and Paca Streets. This neighborhood featured cut-rate jewelry and appliance stores, the seductive Lexington Market, several mean back alleys and bottle-strewn streets and sidewalks.

The pools opened at 5 a.m. and usually were crammed with 30 to 50 men, depending on the job bank's size. The pools were nearly identical, with wide picture windows on the street, but each one had a few peculiar qualities. A Eutaw Street labor pool, for instance, was distinguished by the half-dozen bullet holes prominent in its iron bathroom door. Another pool on Paca set itself apart by having metal, not wooden, folding chairs.

But the atmosphere in the pools over those frigid January mornings never varied. A gray-blue haze of smoke hung thicker as the hours ticked by, and the men, in dirt-caked boots and wrinkled trousers, folded their legs, pulled their caps down low as they read the morning papers, and dragged their eyes on smokers that hung at rakish angles from their dry lips.

They hoped for a contract, a ticket for a steady job. The labor pools operate by contracting business with local establishments that need unskilled men for a day, a week or a month. They pay the men the minimum \$3.10 wage and keep the rest of their earnings for work. One man I knew, for example, worked for a local Pepsi bottling company for a week, earned the minimum wage, but found out later the position actually paid closer to \$8 a day. The labor pool took the rest of his wages.

Men fortunate to get a contract worked on the waterfront sealing and unsealing metal drums, loading and unloading trucks at factories, and markets, and labored as temporary janitors in businesses and apartment complexes around town.

Business was slow this month. Many men prayed aloud for snow because it was then that everybody worked, shoveling snow off streets and sidewalks. In the meantime the men engaged in a time-honored Baltimore pastime known among the down and out as bojo.

Bojo—actually, poking the bojo—connotes an array of benign and jovial social endeavors such as flirting, joking, clowning and story telling. More precisely, it is a way to pass time without submitting to boredom or fatigue. If a man, glancing outside a labor pool window, notices a pretty woman on the street and fantasizes aloud to others about all the lovely things he would like to do with her, it is called bojo.

So is this: "I got this babysitter taking care of my kid at home," an old man said, leaning with his chair against the wall. "She always brings these young bucks into the house. Tell you, home, they go to that Frigidaire like they puttin food in it."

One of the best bojo pokers was Cockeye, the president of Local 194 on Paca Street.

The local's 140 workers were all black and each morning Sam, a retired laborer, swept up hundreds of cigarette and cigar butts from the previous day and mopped down the worn-out linoleum floor. While B. B. King moaned from a tape recorder nearby about nobody loving him.

The hall is supposed to be restricted only to union members, but tramps and prostitutes often came in from off the street to use the toilet and watch the hall's shabby black and white television, which first thing each morning was tuned to Channel 45 and "The Little Rascals."

Cockeye, a rotund bald fellow with one eye askew, was proud to say that the men of local 194 had helped build hundreds of structures around Baltimore, from Memorial Stadium on down to the subway currently being dug.

And the "Pennies," a crew of gray-haired retirees, would attest to it. The oldtimers are called so, he Pennies because they wear copper bracelets made of coins, signifying 25-year membership in the union. Every day, they would join a collection of involuntarily unemployed workers, guzzling beer and soft drinks and playing rowdy games of poker-and pinocchio in the union hall.

Once in a while Cockeye would roll into the smoky room and flick off the television to make an announcement. "All right, listen up, listen up, specially you all bums that don't be doing nothin' but readin' the news. I want you all outta here by 3 o'clock that's when I goes home and locks the door. Any you dues payers see a bum sleepin' back there in the back under those chairs, wake him up and kick his behind out."

"I'll let you all stay here to keep outta the rain, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna come down here in the middle of the night like I had to last night. The police called and said there was a drunk locked up in here trying to kick his way out."

Lately Cockeye's, an no uncles—was on the mission when I overheard him in his untidy second floor office waiting for contractors to call. One afternoon Jimmy and I ventured upstairs to ask him about joining the union.

Jimmy was a District of Columbia native whom I befriended one night on the mission when I overheard him telling another man about Seattle, his hometown. He was a Vietnam veteran and boasted about making 97 parachute jumps in his four-year tour of duty. Since returning from overseas, however, Jimmy had had recurring bouts with alcoholism and had been in and out of jails on drunk driving charges. When I met him he was trying to get enough cash together to visit his sister in Washington, D.C., and claim a check from the Veteran's Administration.

"So you wanna join the union, huh?" Cockeye said to us, folding his hands behind his head. "Can you handle a shovel?"

Yes, we answered.

"A broom?"

Yes.

"Got something with your social security numbers on it?"

We handed him our draft registration cards.

"Well, that's better than most young bucks got, walking around with nothin' but a broom on it even."

"How many members you got here?" I asked. "How 'bout dues?"

"That's none of your goddamned business," Cockeye boomed, smiling at the way we both jumped back. "We claim even got you no job yet. Don't worry 'bout that and don't ask no many questions. We'll figure it out for you."



By Pezzy Case for The Washington Post

## "BALTIMORE HAD ABOUT A HALF-DOZEN LABOR POOLS, MOST OF THEM CLUSTERED ON THE SQUALID FRINGE OF DOWNTOWN... THIS NEIGHBORHOOD FEATURED CUTRATE JEWELRY AND APPLIANCE STORES, THE SEDUCTIVE LEXINGTON MARKET, SEVERAL MEAN BACK ALLEYS AND BOTTLE-STREWN STREETS AND SIDEWALKS."

ing to boost the family income, but also to learn, as Rex put it, "why a man's gotta work to make a place in the world."

Reverend was another case entirely. He was Rex's best friend and, as best friends often do, the two men joked, argued and chided each other constantly in the finest tradition of bojo. Reverend, a thin man with hair of speckled gray and an infectious belly laugh, was called Reverend because his middle initial was R and because, well, he liked the sound of it.

"Now listen, Rex," Rex said at one point, "don't loaf around today or you liable to blow the whole deal for us."

"Friend Rex," Reverend answered, sipping a little whiskey, "I been working since before you were born. I come from the wild, wild west—Open City, Virginia—where life so tough you learn to fight, rob or work. I done it all, but work is my first name."

Despite occasional unworldly swears of Rex's heap, we made it safely to Wagner, a three-turbine coal and oil power station off Fort Smallwood Road in Anne Arundel County, on the banks of the Patapsco River.

As the sun edged above the Chesapeake we arrived at the front gate and encountered two women at the security station.

"Dear Ladies," said Reverend, dropping his pile on a counter. "We are here this fine morning to work for B.F. Shaw Construction Company, which I understand is performing a job out here today."

"Oh, yeah," one of the sleepy women said. "You're the wetbacks."

"Beg your pardon."

"Shaw just laid off about 20 men the other day out' they were being notified to cost too much," she said, yawning. "You're here to take their place."

"Well," Reverend sighed with a flirtatious wink, "any port in a storm." We signed in, headed for the B.F. Shaw trailer parked outside the main entrance to the power plant, and there joined the other men who had arrived ahead of us. Inside, a burly hardhat handed out W-4 forms and green hard hats to each of us.

Reverend finished filling out his form, then settled back with a cup of coffee and helped me with mine.

"How many kids you got?" he asked. "None."

"Oh yesh you do. You have five kids, friend, I see 'em. Real handsome children, yessir. You been mighty active in your young life."

I looked at him in puzzlement.

"Put down five dependents, dummy, and the feds won't take so much out of your check."

Soon after that lesson the burly hardhat led us into the power plant, past the roaring turbines, up into an elevator to the seventh floor where we exited onto a semi-enclosed steel mesh-scaffold. We were outside the main power plant building, seven stories up an exterior structure facing the plant. In the distance, cranes lifted heaps of coal from huge black piles on the river bank. A cold wind knifed through the scaffold.

Our job, which lasted two days, was to clean up after the electricians, pipelitters, carpenters and other skilled laborers who had been refurbishing and reinsulating the power plant on four separate levels. They left behind frozen piles of dust and coal ash, hefty chunks of rusted metal, bushels of yellow insulation, reams of steel doodads and hundreds of beer bottles and other assorted litter.

We swept, lifted and toted refuse inside the plant to service elevators, and filled garbage bags with soil and ash. The grubby job on our crew was the foreman slot, which was manned by a relative of the contractor and the only white man among us. He was a sheepish man, with long brown hair, who smoked an occasional marijuana joint while going from floor to floor checking on our progress.

While Reverend leaned on his push-broom, puffing his Pall Malls, snorting whiskey now and then and spitting tale after tale, Rex and the rest of us lifted gliders and piled up heaps of insulation. At one point Rex scoffed in disgust and threw down his shovel when he came across an immovable pile of frozen soil. When our young foreman glided by Rex grabbed him by the arm and said, "Look, see that pile? I need me a pick to break it up."

"A pick?" the foreman asked. "Yeah, pick, you know, one of them things that got the sharp ends. I gotta break this up."

"Well, I don't know. . . . Wow, I don't remember seeing any pick lying around the trailer."

Rex glared at the man and leaned forward on his shovel. "If you don't find a pick, we ain't gonna be able to clean this floor and if we don't clean this floor the boss man ain't gonna be happy."

Ten minutes later, the foreman returned with a pick, and we man-

Nell Henry, a 26-year-old Washington Post staff writer, spent seven weeks this winter as a homeless bum in Baltimore, Washington and points in between. He began the assignment on Jan. 7, arriving in Baltimore that afternoon without a penny in his pocket. His journey ended two months later on the night of March 7. For a six-day period during the middle of the assignment, Henry came in from the cold to recuperate and transcribe his notes. His "cover" during his days down and out was that he was a struggling writer. But in his travels, only once was Henry asked about his background. This happened one night at the Helping-Up Mission in Baltimore when a bum noticed Henry scribbling in a notebook. "Trying to write a book, eh?" said the man, smiling, after Henry gave his story. "Well don't try telling it to me. I done read it already."

aged to clean the floor in a relatively short time.

Our lunches outside in the trailer those two days were raucous, with Reverend telling shot-em-up stories about the wild West and World War II to Rex's two sons, while Larry, a young high school dropout, defended his desire to join the military.

"Four hundred a month, guaranteed," said he, a stocky man with a bushy moustache. "Better than this construction stuff."

"So you gonna go and fight for the man, huh?" Reverend asked. "Hope you like weekend work, friend. And orders. Lots of orders."

"Shoot, I'm gonna see the world. Military needs folks. Chinese kicking up a storm, Russians in Afghanistan . . ."

"So what? That don't concern you. Ain't like World War II when America didn't have no prepare at all, bringin' out those ships with the moss all over 'em. We got the bomb, now. No need for that pop-gun stuff."

"Well, Reverend," said Larry, "long as people think like that there won't be no reason for navies, armies, nothin, and we won't be able to defend the borders. Countries can't do no business like that."

The older men in the lunch room that day shook their heads when Larry said this and insisted the young man was wrong about the military. "Ain't from then on, wherever Larry went during work, there was a new nickname for him—Patriot."

The last day of the job we ran into trouble with a pulley system, rigged up by our foreman, which was supposed to let down the garbage bags. The system didn't work because the metal drum, which the bags were piled into, was too heavy to let down on the pulley. Once, a man struggled so hard with the drum it almost took him with it.

So I approached the foreman with an alternative. "Who don't just drop the stuff into the hampers from up here?" he asked.

The foreman stroked his beard a moment and admitted, "I guess it'd work, but we need somebody down on the ground to watch so the stuff don't conk anybody in the head."

"We could send one of the old guys down there," Rex said, pointing toward a gray-haired man sweeping nearby.

"No, I'd better handle that," the young man said, and the rest of that afternoon he sat back against a dump-truck, smoking cokes with his hand tucked to one side, and marveled at our trash bags thump, thump thumping into the flatted hampers.

When we finished work that day, all 20 of us piled into cars and roared off to a little liquor store and sou'food restaurant on Fennell Avenue in the city, where we cashed our checks. We received \$8.50 an hour for the two days, which in my case came down to \$123 and change after taxes—a veritable fortune.

The little store was swarming with 100ers that afternoon, eating, drinking and pigging feet, celebrating the sounds of soul tunes, and poking bojo galore. Jimmy, my erstwhile down-and-out comrade, decided to splurge that night by staying in the Howard Hotel. I went back to the street to meet Johnny, a young man I had known several days before he said he could hook me up with another job.

A real piece of cake, he said.

Next: *Bum Heaven—Earning Money*, for walking.