

## Book Review:

# High Voltage Women

## Breaking down the barriers for women in the electrical trades

*High Voltage Women: Breaking Barriers at Seattle City Light* by Ellie Belew (Red Letter Press, 2019) is a welcome addition to the literature about women breaking into historically male occupations in the 1970s, and the ongoing effort to achieve employment equity in the United States. Standing on the legal framework established by Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and that era's progressive Supreme Court, affirmative action efforts opened (sometimes, only briefly) good-paying careers in industries like construction, steel, telephone, and mining — first to men of color, and then to women — through federal and local government initiatives, lawsuits, and organizing in cities across the country.

*High Voltage Women* chronicles the opening to women of three higher-paying career tracks — overhead linework, underground, and substation construction—at Seattle City Light (SCL), a public utility that employed 1900 people, a third of that city's municipal workforce. The book recounts the story of the Electrical Trade Trainee (ETT) program, a pre-apprenticeship program for women at SCL that opened June 24, 1974; and the journeys of the ten women selected for it: Angel Arrasmith, Teri Bach, Megan Cornish, Heidi Durham, (Chaya) Jennifer Gordon, Daisy Jones (Erhart), Letha Neal (Neal-Gray), Jody Olvera, Margie Wakenight (Bellinger), and Patty Wong (Eng), serving as a tribute to these pioneers.

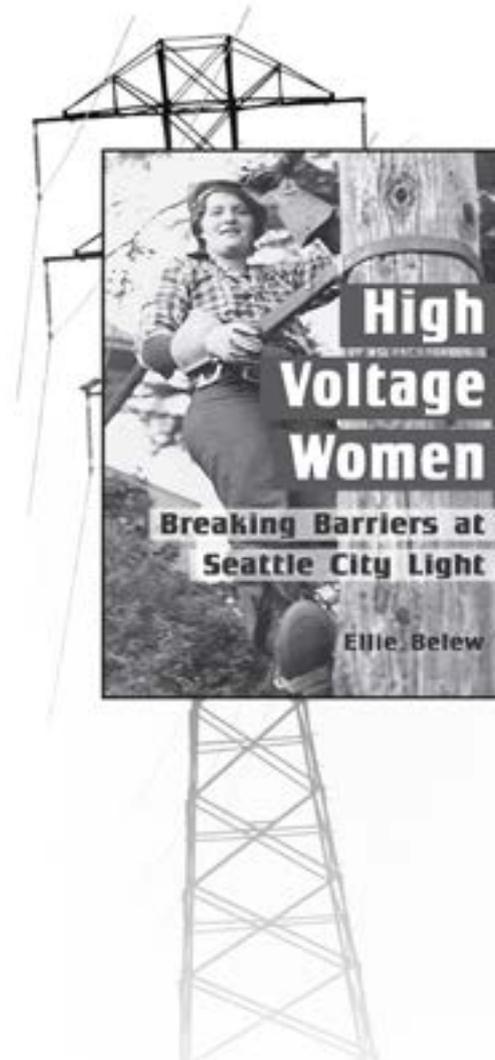
This is a well-researched complex narrative told in chronological order, with appendices and inserted tables to assist those unfamiliar with the particularities of Seattle at that time. Federal affirmative action was strongly reinforced in 1970s Seattle, Washington, by activism of

groups like the United Construction Workers Association; newly established city agencies like the Seattle Human Rights Department and the Office of Women's Rights;

and a series of ordinances passed by the city council, beginning in 1972, prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of race, age, sex, color, creed, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation, and political ideology. The story of the first women to become electricians at SCL played out in a very public sphere and a shifting terrain, that involved several mayors; a high-profile superintendent at the utility; the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 77, a walkout, and a three-month strike by union members at SCL; significant coverage in the *Seattle Times* and the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*; petitions, lawsuits, press conferences, and demonstrations.

Rather than textured details about the structure and skills of the work itself, the book's lens is on the political fights to keep the ETT training program open and effective, and to maintain the goal of those trained having permanent employment at the utility. It documents the physical endangerment the first women faced and clarifies the circumstances of three widely known serious injuries of women linework apprentices, giving vivid accounts of the 1977 accident that resulted in Heidi Durham's broken back and permanent disability; the 1979 accident that caused Teri Bach's broken neck the day following her scoring second highest on the graduating linework exam; and, in 1986, the effort to push Sherrie Holmes off a utility pole. Durham fought to return to SCL at her same job level, and for equity in treatment of injured workers, retiring in 2004

as a senior power dispatcher; Bach, both the first woman journey-level lineworker and cable splicer at SCL, retired in 2004; Holmes made clear she "did not want to be in



*“Intriguing insight into the machinations of power. The women pioneers of the Electrical Trades Trainee program inspire women of colour, trade unionists and radicals everywhere.”*

**Barbara O’Neill,**

**Aboriginal community worker born on Gadigal Country and member of the Australian Services Union**

the middle of a tug-of-war between utility civil rights groups and the line workers in the field,” and continues to demonstrate women’s capabilities through her own successful linework career.

Told from the perspective of Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party, *High Voltage Women* highlights the important role those organizations played in this history, and the activism and perspective of key members: Bach, Cornish, and Durham, who were among the ten ETTs; Clara Fraser, hired as an SCL administrator to design and direct the program; and members who joined apprenticeships at the utility later on. The book mentions but does not flush out strategy disagreements among the ten ETTs, and does not share internal debate among Radical Women members. Instead it focuses on conveying the analysis and strategy undertaken by Radical Women leadership, setting down the choices made as they saw them—including media, lawsuits, and demonstrations—creating a valuable record for historians and activists to

evaluate and compare against strategies undertaken in other circumstances and times.

The rich accomplishments of this book, as well as the early death of four of the ten ETTs — Teri Bach at 61 (2005), Letha Neal at 53 (2005), Patty Wong at 59 (2007), and Heidi Durham at 62 (2015) — should inspire the chronicling of similar histories elsewhere while oral interviews are still possible. Books like *High Voltage Women* provide an important discussion resource for those working toward employment equity. ▼

**Susan Eisenberg**

Susan Eisenberg is author, most recently, of *We'll Call You If We Need You: Experiences of Women Working Construction, With a New Preface* (Cornell, 2018), *Stanley's Girl: Poems* (Cornell, 2018) and the interactive online exhibition, *On Equal Terms: gender & solidarity*. Among the first women in the U.S. to enter the construction trades and become a journey-level union electrician, she is a retired IBEW member and a Resident Scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University in Massachusetts. For more about Susan's work go to [susaneisenberg.com](http://susaneisenberg.com)

### May Day Book Launch

## ***High Voltage Women: Breaking Barriers and Seattle City Light* by labour historian Ellie Belew**

*This is a compelling account of pioneering electrical tradeswomen whose fight against job harassment changed their workplace, their union, and their city.*

**Thursday, 23 May, 6.00 pm**

**Electrical Trades Union, Level 1, 200 Arden Street, North Melbourne**

Featuring a multi-media presentation and local unionist speakers  
Snacks served. Drinks available from the bar.

***High Voltage Women* is published by  
Red Letter Press \$25.00 - 224 pages**

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