

...Noose discovered on a Portland construction job site

From Page 1

Local 290 members and other union craft workers employed by general contractor Andersen Construction.

So what was she to make of the noose?

She took pictures, but didn't know what else to do. She asked the elevator operator, who told her she should report it. She told her foreman, as well as a foreman employed by Andersen.

But when an hour passed and neither took action, she took the noose down herself and put it in the trash, not wanting several Black workers working on the second floor to come across it.

The Andersen foreman said he'd bring it up at a meeting of foremen, but when she asked him about it days later, she said he'd forgotten.

She waited a week. Still nothing happened. She told her union rep about it, and he reported back that Andersen Construction was investigating. But nobody had contacted her about it. Almost three weeks after the noose appeared, she approached a biracial female apprentice electrician to ask if she'd heard anything about a noose investigation. The electrician said that was the first she'd heard of the noose, much less an investigation.

"It didn't appear that anybody I'd informed of it was very invested," she says. She shared her photos of the noose with the electrician.

Not knowing who else to turn to, she decided to reach out to Kelly Kupcak, the former heavy equipment operator who now leads Oregon Tradeswomen Inc. Oregon Tradeswomen Inc. is a non-profit that recruits and prepares women to enter skilled trades, and she had graduated from its pre-apprenticeship training program.

"She was clear what was most important was that action be taken and that there be accountability," Kupcak says. Kupcak got busy making phone calls.

Within days, union business agents from the Carpenters, IBEW, and Local 290 were on the job site talking to workers about the incident. The electrician reported it to higher-ups at Cherry City Electric, and its parent company Morrow Meadows flew up diversity specialist "Big John" Harriel Jr. from Los An-



The Fourth and Montgomery Building, when it's complete, will house a new School of Public Health jointly managed by Oregon Health and Science University and Portland State University (PSU), dental programs for Portland Community College, and space for PSU's College of Education and the City of Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. When the public agency project owners were notified about the noose incident, all four issued statements condemning the act.

ges to meet with the IBEW members.

The Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters addressed the incident in a June 17 Facebook post.

"Putting a noose on the job is a disgusting homage to slavery, violence against Black people, control, and murder," the council said. "It is a violent act that has no place on a union job, or anywhere else in our industry or society. That noose was not a violent act by one person. Violence was perpetrated and maintained and encouraged by every person who walked by without taking it down or reporting it."

On June 19, Kupcak and Patricia Daniels of the pre-apprenticeship training group Constructing Hope sent a letter to Andersen Construction—signed by 25 local unions and councils and 17 other organizations—asking the general contractor to take multiple steps to address the noose incident, including a zero-tolerance anti-bias policy, a protocol for responding to future incidents, and anti-racism training for supervisors.

A symbol of racial terror

Oregon workplaces have had problems with nooses. In 2017, Daimler Trucks North America was ordered to pay a \$750,000 jury award for failing to respond effectively when a Black worker at its North Portland truck plant was twice confronted with nooses, among other instances of racial hostility. And that came two years after Daimler paid \$2.4 million to settle complaints by six workers who faced repeated on-the-job harassment, including yet another noose incident. Oregon Health and Science University has had three noose incidents in the last three years, the most recent of which involved an OHSU employee posting an image of a noose in an online work chatroom.

Anthony O'Neal, a Black journeyman pipefitter who helped found a union diversity committee at Local 290, thinks many white workers don't understand how psychologically damaging it can be for a Black worker to see a noose on the job site.

"Some people think people of

color are too sensitive about it. But it's my ancestors, and it's not that long ago."

It's estimated that over 4,000 African-Americans were lynched between 1877 and 1950. Mobs of white people would turn out to observe and take part, with lynchings sometimes advertised in advance in local newspapers. That's why the noose is seen as a potent threat and a symbol of racial terror.

O'Neal said he's seen two of them on job sites in his 14 years in the union.

Since the perpetrators don't come forward to explain their motives, it's not clear whether they intend it as a hostile act or a practical joke. But as a joke, a noose is about as funny as a burning cross on a front lawn or swastika painted on a synagogue.

Word of the incident spreads

Kupcak and Daniels' letter to Andersen Construction, signed by 25 unions, got an immediate response.

Unknown to the signers of the letter, CEO Joel Andersen had first heard about the noose in a June 8 email from a company attorney—after an image of the noose was posted to social media by a construction worker. That was already 19 days after the incident, but at the CEO's direction the company took immediate action, shutting down the job for work site meetings.

A dozen posters went up declaring the project to be a respectful workplace, and asking workers to report any

concerns to senior project manager Jeff Slinger. A group text went out asking for tips. After company managers turned up no suspects, the company also filed a police report, and hired a private investigator. And Andersen himself came to meet several women of color apprentices on the job site—including the apprentice who found and reported the noose.

"She did what she was supposed to," Andersen told the *Labor Press*. "She relied on the system. The system failed. It wasn't acted on. It wasn't taken seriously. It didn't make it up the chain of command."

Andersen says he wants to make sure the company reacts differently if it happens again.

After getting the letter, Andersen had long conversations with Kupcak and others, including union officials and other leaders of the Metropolitan Alliance for Workforce Equity (MAWE).

Andersen also notified the construction project's public agency owners about the incident, and they sent out workplace-wide emails June 22 and 23 saying they were treating it with the utmost seriousness. Those statements led to a slew of news media reports about the noose incident.

Kupcak was interviewed by an agent from the Civil Rights division of the FBI.

"Our industry needs to change," Kupcak says. "It's long overdue."

MAWE put forward its own proposal to Metro and regional public owners in a June 24 letter, asking that general contractors be required to have clearly written disciplinary procedures and a zero tolerance policy that includes holding supervisors and foremen accountable if they fail to act on reported incidents. The letter also calls for training for foremen, stewards and superintendents, and a daily scan and removal of offensive graffiti.

At the Fourth and Montgomery work site, Anderson Construction will be holding a series of mandatory "respectful workplace" meetings July 9 and 10 for all construction workers on

the site.

"We work really hard to make people safe from harm, so they don't have to feel like a hero hanging off a scaffold. We have not given anywhere near the attention to emotional harm," Andersen said. "I want a day to come when it doesn't take courage to come to work."

Andersen said he plans to talk to other general contractors. He wants the industry to start taking responsibility for improving construction workplace culture.

"We may have been slow out of the box, but we will be sprinting out the finish," Andersen said.

