

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

CUNY Graduate Center

2020

For Tony Feliciano, A Friend and a Union Man

Marc Kagan
CUNY Graduate Center

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/647

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

For My Friend, Tony Feliciano, a Union Man

*My friend Tony Feliciano, transit worker 1984-2020, and a union man all his life, died a few weeks ago; he had just turned 61. While transit workers were dying this spring, he actually made it out of the 207th St. Overhaul Shop where he worked virtually his whole career in May; he put in his papers and retired to his house in Rockland County. **Thirty-six** years on the job – a senior man. That was COVID time, **so** he couldn't have a retirement party. He told me he was being careful, that he would "suit up" in a mask and goggles – Marc, do you remember how we use to suit up in the white suits with the breathing unit to change the paint booth filters? – to go to the grocery store.*

But he died of a heart attack, before he could even collect his first pension check.

We came in to the TA off the same list as kids in 1984 – as Helpers – and worked together for sixteen years. But I'll just let him talk, from an interview we did right before COVID. A veteran transit worker, thinking about his life and times.

I've always been a union guy. Before I came to the Transit I was in the steelworkers union. I got fired because I became a shop steward, in Brooklyn. I was in the Navy Yard, a little dumpy place that made lifeboats with fiberglass and sheet metal. As soon as I became a shop steward, I got axed. So I've always been a fighter, still a fighter, especially with safety.

When I got to 207th St., it was considered a 'country club' – workers and foremen worked together, partied together. Then Bullwhip came in. [*"Bullwhip" Davis – he actually had a whip – was brought into the shop to break the union's power.*] And he starts taking away the refrigerators, and the coffee makers and the grills. The union came up with, 'break time, everyone show up in the barn at that greasy spoon.' And 800 guys were standing there at 9 o'clock. When I got back to work, I was written up for being off my job. I remember the noise in the shop every time Davis would come out on Broadway. They just made mayhem whenever he walked out – blowing horns, banging on shit, throwing things at him. What we went through was an interesting education for a young guy. But we lost. Bullwhip left a mark. To this day, his scars are still on the walls of the fucking shop.

I took a couple of promotional exams, finally became a plant maintenance **mechanic** in 1988. I had the pleasure of working with Louis Russo Sr., the greatest shop steward ever. I still remember when he took the whole gang and we all marched down the main aisle in the shop to protest the Deputy Superintendent, the whole gang went to his office. I remember the day he brought in a steam jenny to steam the lead paint off the walls and we stopped him. When Russo retired, I was an Assistant Steward, and then I took over for maybe ten years. A gang is almost like a baseball team. You're playing together, you have a purpose, and you stick together.

In 1999, I was on TV, I was the representative transit worker. Giuliani was threatening to arrest us. *You were down at the Manhattan Center [TWU's first mass rally in over a decade]?* Yes. And Giuliani said, if anyone said the word strike, they should be arrested. The cops were walking around with their fucking plastic handcuffs. And I remember Arthur Chen from NY1 questioned me about it. And I said, you know what? We should go on strike – Giuliani has threatened to put us in jail? We should go on fucking strike. I didn't get arrested. I said it on television.

In 2005, we went on strike, it was the right thing to do. I think one thing; most guys felt unity. That part was good. We felt it when we came back to work. Unfortunately, we should have held out a little longer. It was hard. I saw it, that scabs were crossing the picket lines. We still have them in the shop. To this day, when I pass and I see them, the cat hairs stand up on the back of my neck. So, I'm

sure the pressure Roger [Toussaint] had when he went on strike must have been tremendous. I think the strike was, not fully successful, but I think it showed strength and unity, that the transit workers could band together and shut down the fucking system. It's great. I mean, right today, in France, they shut down the fucking country. That's what this place needs. Shut this place down. Not easy; not easy. So there was a lot of weight on Roger's shoulders.

We had a guy, he became chairman of the union committee in the shop. He came into the locker room, he came by my locker and he says, 'I'm going downtown.' I say, you just became chairman, how are you going to say that? 'I don't give a fuck, I'm going downtown,' banging his chest. A lot of guys are like that, and then you never see them again. **When Bullwhip was here, the union president never came** to the shop. How are you going to do that? I can remember Roger coming to the shop all the time, answering tough questions. You know, that's big. That's why I kept voting for him.

A good **union officer** shows up. If **you** come in and confront situations that your workers **tell** you about, you would move management and workers to do what you have to do. You're in this position, you carry this title, earn your way – prove your worth.

The conditions from the day I walked in in '84 are still the same. Nothing's changed. I came in in '84, the place was a dump; 36 years later, it's still a dump. There's still lead paint peeling off the walls. I go to my doctor, he checks me for lead. He says, 'you're okay, don't disturb it.' The other day, I'm running the overhead crane, I had to move some subway truck carriages that hadn't been moved in ages. So I put on my filter mask. And for sure, when it went underneath one of the big blower fans, it was like a dust storm, all over the place. Today, down on the floor they were burning greasy metal, there was a cloud of haze. I said what the fuck is going on? No fume-sucker. I tell guys off. I took my foreman and said, we're not doing this. But the union throws it on you. You go to the chairman and they say, 'you put in the safety resolution form.' Most guys say, why should I be the bad guy, and the union will be sitting over here?

The new pension – Tier 6 – is bad. It's the old divide-and-conquer. I told one of these Tier 6 guys, he's bitching and moaning, I said, don't worry, they'll divide you up soon enough. As soon as all us Tier 4 guys are gone – which is close – they'll be a Tier 7 and a Tier 8, to divide you up and give you different interests. But right now Tier 6 is a big group of guys. The next contract, it's going to be all Tier 6 guys. You see the t-shirts they wear in the shop – "Fix Tier 6" – that's all it says. Nothing about TWU – I think it's self-organized. I think that will unify the union; that what guys will fight about. But the TA is not stupid. They'll go to Albany and say, time for a new pension tier, time to separate them.

We could win the public over. Like the Chicago teachers did. We have toy drives, blood drives. In that respect we care, but the community doesn't see it. We would have to become more public about what we do.

Life gets in the way. There are many times – you go home, you got your kids, your family. There's a point when I was shop steward, that I felt anxious. I had too many hats on. I had to let go. Now I'm sixty. I got 36 years, I've been working overtime, I'm losing money staying here. I'm ready, I'm ready to go and enjoy my retirement and my family.

Farewell, Tony, my best friend in transit. A fighter. A union man always. We need more like him.