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From the Los Angeles Times

L.A. gang members go union

A rising number of gangbangers are moving into well-paid futures as members of the region's building trade unions.

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Shortly after his release from prison four years ago, Julio Silva entered the apprenticeship program in the Ironworkers Union Local 433 in La Palma.

To his alarm, he learned that ironworkers called all first-year apprentices "punk."

He had been an East Los Angeles gang member, a drug user, and a car burglar in and out of jail. In that world, a "punk" was someone's prison sex slave.

But Silva tried not to let it bother him. The more he worked at his new job, the more his skills improved. Ironwork became the one legal thing he had done well. It also paid $29 an hour, plus benefits.

Glimpsing a future, Silva's desire to do drugs was replaced by his determination to master the use of sleever bars and spud crescents.

After Silva's first year on the job, the ironworkers simply called him Julio.

"I never thought my history would allow me to have something more than $7 an hour," said Silva, 37. "I don't see this happening nowhere else but in the union. It's given me the best opportunity of my life."

Silva is among a large and growing number of Southern California gang members who have joined building-trade unions over the last decade as construction work has boomed. These good-paying jobs were once reserved for those with family connections, as fathers recruited sons.

But today, beset by nonunion competition and an aging membership, unions have stepped up recruitment in minority enclaves where many young men have criminal pasts. Now homeboy recruits homeboy.

Members of Dog-patch, in Bellflower, and West Side Wilmas, in Wilmington, are in the Ironworker Union Locals 416 and 433. Members of the 204th Street gang in the Harbor Gateway area of Los Angeles are in the Sheet Metal Workers Local 105. And members of the South Side 18th Street Tiny Diablos are Teamsters.

"We probably make up the majority of the workforce now," said Albert Frey, once a Crip and crack dealer, now an apprentice with the Steam-Refrigeration-Air Conditioning-Pipefitters Union Local 250.

No one knows exactly how many gang members are in the building trades because the unions have stopped asking about recruits' backgrounds. Some unions even will allow a man to remain a member while in prison -- as Frey did for two years -- if he pays his monthly dues.

"This is our gang now," Frey said, "in a positive way, though."

'Almost like a lodge'

For decades, membership in the building trades was tightly restricted. Unions controlled most of the work sites throughout Southern California and kept their numbers low.

Most members were white. But even that wasn't enough to get into a union.

"You damn near had to be a relative of somebody's," said Jim Watkins, business manager of the Heat and Frost Insulators Local 5 in Azusa, who joined in the 1950s. "It was tightknit, almost like a lodge."

But by the 1980s, many contractors were bridling at union control. Nonunion contractors had emerged to compete for jobs. Among their employees were inner-city youths and ever-greater numbers of illegal immigrants.

By the early 1990s, veteran union members were retiring and membership fell, while work and nonunion contractors flourished.

"When we controlled 80% of the work, we were very cocky," Watkins said. "When we went down to 20%, we started reevaluating."

A new generation of union leaders opened up membership to almost anyone who wanted to work hard. They began recruiting aggressively in the inner city. Some stopped requiring a high school diploma or even that apprentices speak English.

Among those who responded were men with gang and criminal records and few options.

"These are the people who are undermining [unions] by going to work for nonunion contractors at much lower wages, with no benefits," said Sharon Delugach, staff director of the UCLA Downtown Labor Center. "Nobody likes change and these [union] guys like change less than anyone, but it's in their self-interest" to recruit in inner-city neighborhoods.

The Heat and Frost Insulators local was 65% white in the late 1970s. "Now it's 65%" nonwhite, said Tom Gutierrez, who joined the union in 1980 and now is apprenticeship coordinator. "We had to start branching out" if membership was to grow, he said.

Gutierrez and others now fill their schedules with trips to high schools and career fairs. Lilly Rodriguez, apprentice coordinator for the Painters and Allied Trades Union, has sought recruits at probation offices.

"What I tell ex-felons is, you can never say the union didn't give you an opportunity to be a productive citizen," Rodriguez said.

But there are problems with the more open approach. Since Sept. 11, many sensitive work sites -- including government buildings, shipyards, chemical and nuclear plants, police departments and schools -- require extensive background checks of workers. Those checks screen specifically for illegal immigrants and ex-convicts.

Not all gang members thrive in unions. Some take orders poorly, chafe at getting up at 4:30 a.m. and are happier selling drugs.

"Some guys, it's hard to get the 'hood out of them," Gutierrez said.

Even those who make it into the apprenticeship program and go on to earn good money don't always leave their gangs. For years, several 204th Street gang members, now sheet-metal union workers, hung out every weekend in their old neighborhood in Harbor Gateway, though their union jobs allowed them to buy homes as far away asthe Inland Empire.

"It's hard for you to rip yourself away from it," said Armando Valadez, 33, who spent his first three years as an apprentice heat-and-frost insulator.

"Every Friday [after work] I'd go and see some of my homies," Valadez said. "I had a son, a wife and a union job. Still the gang was stronger."

Frey, the former Crip, was facing a drug possession charge when he joined the Steamfitters. He was convicted about a year into his apprenticeship program and sentenced to two years in prison.

He spoke with union officials, who gave him a leave of absence.

In prison, "I had time to sit down and say, 'Where are your priorities, Albert?' " said Frey, 40, who is married with three children. "You're getting too old."

Since his release last year, Frey said, he has left his gang activities and drug dealing behind and is now determined to finish his apprenticeship.

For those with prison records, he said, the building trades "are the only places that accept us."

Union leaders say most gang members leave their affiliations at home and that work sites are remarkably free of street rivalries. The Ironworkers Union, in particular, has gone after gang members and parolees for work that is hard and often dangerous, requiring men to labor on bridges and soaring office towers.

"They take that street toughness that puts them into Corcoran or Pelican Bay [state prisons] and put it into this," said Robbie Hunter, president of the Ironworkers Union. "The electricians require algebra and all that. What we require is no fear. They're perfect for us."

Making a new life

One of those men was Julio Silva.

Growing up in a fatherless family in Boyle Heights, Silva joined the Evergreen Street gang when he was 12.

He spent his high school years in the California Youth Authority followed by a decade of gangbanging and drug use. Married with five children, he lived mostly on general relief, Section 8 housing subsidies and the car stereos he stole.

In 2002, he was convicted of drug possession and imprisoned for 18 months.

Upon his release, Silva spent three weeks at Homeboy Industries, the Boyle Heights nonprofit run by Father Gregory Boyle that finds work for gang members. One day, a worker was shot to death painting over gang graffiti.

In response, building unions began recruiting gang members as part of their broader efforts in inner-city neighborhoods. Silva was there when Hunter showed up looking for potential ironworkers.

"I didn't know what was involved," Silva said. "I just waved my hand."

A month later, he was a pre-apprentice, installing printing machinery at the Los Angeles Times' printing plant. From there, he got his first real ironworker job -- helping build a post office near Chinatown.

"It was scary," he said. "I didn't know what I was getting involved in. [But] the faces, they all seemed to me they had been in the same background -- prisons, gangs, lockdowns."

In time, Silva finished his work for a general equivalency diploma, which the union required. It also mandated that he have a driver's license, which he had lost 16 years before for drunk driving. So for 18 months, he went to DUI class to regain his license.

Meanwhile, he attended ironworker school. He remarried, to Silvia Cantu, a woman from his old neighborhood.

She helped him study, making flashcards to test his math skills, ironworker vocabulary and the hand signs needed to communicate with crane operators.

He got custody of his five children. He and Silvia, who live in a two-bedroom apartment, now raise them along with her daughter and their son.

Silva is in the last six months of his four-year apprenticeship. As a journeyman, his wages and benefits will eventually reach $49 an hour.

"My eyes get a little watery, where I was a few years ago and where I'm at now," he said. "It's like another opportunity of life. I'm proud to be an ironworker."

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Union members: In a caption accompanying an article in Monday's Section A about L.A. gang members joining building trade unions, ironworker Julio Silva was incorrectly identified as Jose Silva.