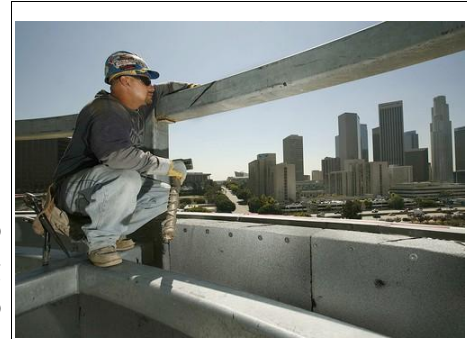


# From the Gang to the Union

(From an *LA Times* story by Sam Quinones)

Julio used to be in a gang in Los Angeles. He went to jail for having drugs. When he got out, he tried something different. He *joined* a union of construction workers who build **skyscrapers**. (*see picture*)



*Jose builds skyscrapers in Los Angeles.*

At first, the other workers made fun of him. But the more he worked, the more he *improved*. The other workers started respecting him. This was the first legal job he did well. It also paid \$29 an hour, plus benefits. Julio said that this was possible because of his union. "It's given me the best *opportunity* of my life."

There are many new skyscrapers in Southern California, and *former* gang members helped build them. No one knows exactly how many gang members there are, because the unions stopped asking about people's *backgrounds*. It used to be almost impossible to join a construction union. For years, there were only a small number of union construction workers, and they were paid lots of money. Most of them were white. You had to be family or close friends with someone in the union.

But in the 1990s, more non-union workers, including undocumented immigrants and poor black Americans, were in construction. Less people joined the union, and the union workers got older. New union leaders changed things. They said that anyone could join the union if they worked hard. They talked to poor black people and undocumented immigrants. The unions changed. One construction union used to be 65% white. Now it's 65% nonwhite.

Some gang members don't succeed in the union. They don't like waking up at 4:30am and working hard all day. And some get into trouble and go back to jail. One worker was arrested for selling drugs. He went to jail for two years. The union let him stay in the union – if he paid his *dues*. After he got out, he stopped selling drugs for good.

One construction union builds big bridges and tall buildings. Their work is hard and dangerous, and they need people who are not afraid. They love workers who used to be in gangs. "What we *require* is no fear. They're perfect for us."

## Vocabulary

1. *join* – verb – To become part of an organization. "I joined a new soccer team last Saturday."
2. *improve* – verb – To get better. "My soccer game improved when I played every day."
3. *opportunity* – noun – A chance. "I came here for an opportunity for a better life."
4. *former* – adjective – Before, previous. "Jenny is a former US army soldier."
5. *background* – noun – Where you're from, what you used to do. "My boss checked my background before she hired me."
6. *dues* – noun – The money you pay to be in an organization. "I pay union dues every month."
7. *require* – verb – What you need. "My new job requires me to work two weekends a month."

## Vocabulary Practice

1. ___ join	a. Before, previous.
2. ___ improve	b. A tall building, usually an office building.
3. ___ opportunity	c. What you need.
4. ___ former	d. To become part of an organization.
5. ___ background	e. The money you pay to be in an organization.
6. ___ dues	f. A chance.
7. ___ require	g. Where you're from, what you used to do.
8. ___ _____	h. To get better.

## Questions

1. Unions used to be mostly white. Why did they change?
2. Why do former gang members join construction unions? Why are they good for the unions?
3. Many people in construction unions in Southern California used to be in gangs. But now they almost never fight. Why?
4. Why did the union let one member stay in the union after he went to jail?

# Making a New Life in the Union

Julio is a former gang member who builds skyscrapers. He grew up without a father in a poor neighborhood in LA. He joined a gang when he was 12. He went to a children's jail, got out, got married, had five kids, got divorced, and lived on money from the government. He also stole car stereos. In 2002 he was arrested for having drugs and went to jail for 18 months.

When he got out, Julio joined a union. He didn't know what he was doing. It just sounded like a good idea. Soon he was working on machines at the LA Times newspaper and building a post office near Chinatown. "It was scary," he said. But he knew he was not the only former gang member there. "The faces, they all seemed to me they had



*Julio builds skyscrapers in Southern California.*

been in the same background — prisons, gangs, lockdowns."

The union required a high school diploma, so Julio got his diploma. The union also required a drivers license. Julio lost his license for drunk driving when he was young, so he went to a class to get his license again. He also married a woman from his old neighborhood. She helped him study math and vocabulary for his new job. He got his five kids and had two more with his new wife. In the union, after working for many years, his wages and benefits will be \$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," Julio says.



*Albert paid his dues from jail for two years. When he got out, he quit selling drugs for good.*

## Questions

1. Where is Julio from? What did he do when he was young?
2. Why did Julio join the union?
3. Why do members enjoy the union? Why do they have to pay dues?