

# *Jane LaTour, Fighter for Women in Labor Unions, Dies at 76*

No stranger to blue-collar work herself, she pushed for equality in male-dominated unions and as a writer chronicled the struggles of “sisters in the brotherhoods.”



Jane LaTour in 2002. As a woman in the labor force, she encountered sex discrimination, harassment and “large and small daily indignities.” Credit...Jon Bloom  
By [John Leland](#) April 6, 2023

Jane LaTour, a union activist and writer who chronicled the lives of women in traditionally male labor unions, documenting their battles with both their employers and their unions, died on Monday in the Bronx. She was 76.

Her husband, Russell Smith, said her death, in hospice care at Calvary Hospital, was caused by lung cancer that had spread to other organs.

Working as unions were declining in strength, Ms. LaTour often criticized labor leaders, whom she accused of not representing the needs of their rank and file. She was the author of the 2008 book “[Sisters in the Brotherhoods: Working Women Organizing for Equality in New York City](#),” and her writing won several journalism awards.

She also taught, managed labor history archives, helped create maps of labor history sites in New York City and State, and ran a nonprofit program supporting democratic reforms within unions.

“She’s really an institution,” [Priscilla Murolo](#), a labor historian, said in an interview. “Everyone around the New York labor movement knew Jane LaTour. And outside the movement she really was invisible.”

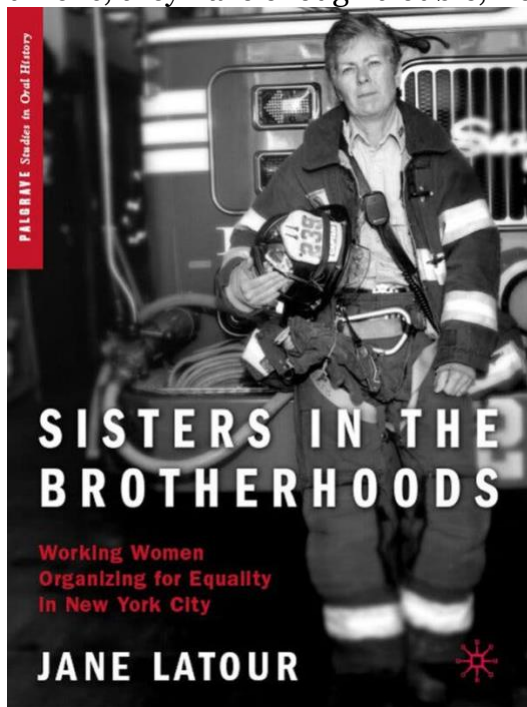
Ms. LaTour got her start in labor unions when she left college in her first year to earn money. She worked as a spot welder, drill press operator and warehouse worker, among other jobs, an experience she [later compared](#) to that of “a visiting anthropologist trying to understand the strange folkways of the people I encountered.”

What she encountered, often, was sexual discrimination and harassment, the “large and small daily indignities” that drove her to union activism and ultimately back to Rutgers University. She earned a bachelor’s degree in history there in 1971, graduating with highest honors, and a master’s in labor studies in 1977.

Throughout her work, her husband said, “she had two lines of pursuit.”

“One was equality for women: Women should be allowed to become plumbers and electricians and firefighters,” he said. “And unions must become democratic. The survival of organized labor was at stake unless labor managed to clean its house.”

For this work, he added, “she got a lot of pushback from people who said, ‘Don’t criticize unions, they have enough trouble, we have to support our leadership.’ She said no.”



Ms. LaTour told the stories of women in the labor movement in a 2008 book. The book title, “Sisters in the Brotherhoods,” and the author’s name, Jane LaTour are rendered in white capital letters; the subtitle, “Working Women Organizing for Equality in New York City,” is upper and lowercase in red. Credit...via Springer Nature

Jane Ellen Latour (she capitalized the T in her surname after she started writing professionally) was born on May 3, 1946, in Burlington, Vt., the third of five children of

Irene (Fisher) Latour, a former model, and Ransom Latour, who sold insurance and managed jewelry stores.

She was a bookish child who fell asleep most nights reading under the covers, her sister Mary Butler said. Ms. LaTour said her Roman Catholic upbringing had led her to believe that reform — whether in workplaces or within unions — had to come from the least powerful.

She had a son, Richard, in 1966, whom she put up for adoption. She married Jim Kowalski, a college student, the next year. The marriage ended in divorce after a few years. She later developed a bond with her son.

In October 1991, Ms. LaTour struck up a conversation on an uptown Manhattan A train with Russell Smith, a union tour guide and shop steward. He suggested they go out for coffee. “She said, ‘Let’s go for a beer,’” Mr. Smith said. They moved in together in Upper Manhattan two years later and married in December 2012.

“We lived a life glued to news services and media,” Mr. Smith said. “We didn’t own a car or have property. We were more people of books and ideas.”

Her work involved both telling women’s stories and helping to improve their working conditions. A stint as an organizer for New York City’s District 65 of the United Automobile Workers of America, a famously left-leaning union, left her disillusioned with the way higher-ups in the union treated the rank and file.

“Rather than everyone being on the same team,” she said, “the members would often be fighting against the union.” She was fired after three years, because, she said, “I favored workers over the union.”

So she focused on reforming unions from the outside, and on telling the stories of their members. She worked for the [Association for Union Democracy](#), a nonprofit reform group, where she ran the Women’s Project; for the [New York Labor History Association](#); and as an archivist for the [Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives](#) at New York University. For the last 20 years, she worked as a journalist for [Public Employee Press](#), the official publication of District Council 37 of AFSCME (the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees).

“Jane saw in the stories of these tradeswomen a universal story and a chance to show people that these women in the trades — Black, brown, white, gay, straight — were feminists,” said [Brenda Berkman](#), who successfully sued the New York Fire Department to get it to scrap a physical test that excluded her and other women. (Her story was told in Ms. LaTour’s “Sisters in the Brotherhoods.”)

“They might not think of themselves as feminists,” Ms. Berkman added, “they might not even know how to define their feminism, but they were saying a lot of the same things that the feminist movement had been saying since the 1960s.”

For Veronica Session, a carpenter profiled in Ms. LaTour's book, the attention gave her validation at a time when tradeswomen were not very visible.

"It gave a voice to our stories and our plight," Ms. Session said. "It meant that all your strife was not for naught, that it meant something. It gave me energy to keep on, knowing that somehow this would matter to people. And also, that someone might see themselves in me."

Ms. LaTour's last days in hospice drew a vigil by the kind of women she had commemorated: pioneering firefighters, ironworkers, carpenters, plumbers and union dissidents. She remained optimistic that unions have a future, her husband said — if they reform.

In addition to Mr. Smith, Ms. LaTour, who lived in the Inwood section of Manhattan, is survived by her son, Richard Heber; her sisters, Mary Butler and Susie Morin; and three grandchildren.

Her second book, provisionally titled "Rebels With a Cause: An Oral History of the Fight for Democracy in New York City Unions," is scheduled for publication next year.