

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Union membership is up. Perhaps you read about it in the papers, although you probably had to dig deep to find it, given the way labor issues are covered in the mainstream media. That's a pity, because the news is really very good.

Total union membership in the United States rose by more than 265,000 in 1999, according to the U.S. Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). This is the largest one-year jump in membership in more than 20 years. I am proud to say that our union played a part in generating these numbers. With some 50,000 new members added mainly through organizing and recruitment—the IBEW alone accounted for nearly 10 percent of the growth in U.S. union membership last year.

The BLS figures show that union membership in the U.S. rose from 16.21 million to 16.48 million. The percentage of American workers represented by unions remained steady at 13.9 percent, reversing a trend of decline. The percentage figure is especially important because it shows that unions are gaining a share of the strong job creation of recent years.

The best news was in the private sector where union membership increased by 112,493. This was only the second time in 20 years that the private sector showed a net gain in union membership, and the 1999 figure nearly doubles the last increase. In addition, the 1999 private sector increase by itself outpaced the 1998 growth in both the public *and* private sectors. The percentage of union members in the private sector also held steady, snapping a 22-year string of reduced numbers.

The increased numbers are encouraging, but even more heartening are the reasons behind the statistics. Without a doubt, the strong organizing efforts of the IBEW and other unions have played a major role. The growth in the national economy has created new jobs, many of which are in unionized industries. Workers in traditionally nonunion sectors, such as medical and high tech, have been more receptive to orga-

nizing (see page 5 of this issue). Other voices in the community, such as those of religious leaders and elected officials, have increasingly called for strengthening workers' right to organize.

Most important, however, have been the efforts of countless IBEW local leaders, organizers and rank and file members who have worked so hard and so tirelessly to bring our union and others back into the plus column. When I took office in 1986, organizing had become dormant at every level of the Brotherhood. It took education and constant reinforcement of the importance of organizing to change a culture of the status quo that had become ingrained in our union. But change it we did, as a team. Since 1994, we have seen a net gain of some 40,000 new members in Canada and the United States, primarily in construction. Our numbers in construction are greater than they have ever been. That is quite an accomplishment—proof positive that the years of decline are over, and we must never let them return.

We still, however, have miles to go. Our industrial membership continues to drop from its all-time high in the mid-1970s. The economic restructuring of North America brought about by technology and the global marketplace has taken a mighty toll. We may never see our historic high numbers again, but there is certainly no shortage of targets to pursue in electronic manufacturing, telecommunications, utilities, railroads and broadcasting, as well as construction.

We are gratified to see the numbers turning our way, but will never rest in the struggle to organize. ☐

On the Rise

J. J. BARRY



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