



& Beyond

**THE IMMEDIATE
FUTURE OF ELECTRICAL
CONSTRUCTION
SEEMS CLEAR, BUT THE
LONG TERM IS ANYBODY'S
GUESS. THE TIME-TESTED
TOOL OF ORGANIZING
AND TRAINING COMBINED
WITH NEW MARKETING
EFFORTS AND NEW
TECHNOLOGY WILL
PREPARE THE IBEW
FOR THE FUTURE.**

Construct

"The days of doom and gloom in the organized construction sector are over."

So said IBEW International President J. J. Barry in 1997, foreseeing an upturn in the fortunes of the unionized electrical construction industry, which has largely come to pass. The IBEW's construction members have ample reason to view the new century with optimism, tempered with memories of tough times and vigilance to keep the good times going.

The good news is that IBEW construction membership has grown dramatically, crossing the 300,000 mark, and that the rate of unionization increased steadily throughout 1999. While construction building projections for 2000 are for "only the same" rate of overall investment as 1999, that \$429 billion investment of 1999 is an astounding 69 percent higher than the \$252 billion of 1992. In electrical construction, installation and maintenance in voice data video (VDV) promises growth as far as can be seen into the 2000s.

The background of the bright construction outlook is the wholesale change Barry called for in 1987 when he launched his program for growth. "It's not enough to say we're going to organize and commit more resources to organizing. We must change the atmosphere of organizing as well," he said. Now, after years of hard work to put the pieces in place, that atmosphere has been changed.

To see how the current success was built is to see the paths that have to be followed to sustain the bright outlook in the 2000s. Major factors in that success include:

New technology is not confined to new areas of work opportunities like VDV, but has also affected the traditional work of the IBEW, supplying electric power, because of the emergence of solar photovoltaics, a renewable source of power that will expand as it becomes more cost effective.

Training is "the single most important factor that separates us from the non-union," Barry says, and the wholesale expansion of

skill development programs, for both journeymen and apprentices, is a key to seizing the expanding job opportunities.

Organizing became a whole new ball game in the past decade, with a new teamwork and aggressiveness that now are imbedded in the culture of IBEW.

Marketing Campaigns through joint labor-management efforts to sell quality construction have produced results that startled even advocates.

"Good times can be a trap," warn President Barry and International Secretary-Treasurer Edwin D. Hill. They cite the complacency that cost union construction so dearly in the decades prior to 1990. "Our plan for progress," Barry says, "consists of keeping the proven tools of success while constantly adapting to shifting circumstances. We're in this for the long haul."

New—and Current—Technology

Voice-data-video installation has grown steadily since the breakup of AT&T in 1984 and continues to be put out to bid among both inside and outside contractors. The growth projected for the years immediately ahead, is by any reckoning, astounding. The \$1.3 billion fiber optic installation market will grow to \$2.4 billion in 2002; Lucent Technologies expects growth of 16 percent annually in teledata equipment, going from a \$96 billion industry in 1997 to \$153 billion in 2002. But technology is still emerging, says industry expert Joe Salimando, and "perhaps that means that the \$4

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billion invested in installation last year grows to \$7 or \$8 billion a year in the next five years." The only defensible projection is that the industry will grow from 11 to 15 percent a year for the next decade, he says. Somewhere around the year 2015, VDV work will match all other electrical installation in volume.

"The key is partnership," says Charles W. (Bud) Fisher, executive assistant to Barry, of the relationship between IBEW and the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA). A good labor-management relationship doesn't mean givebacks, but it does mean finding every feasible avenue of working together on the new market because, Fisher says, "no customer investing in voice-data-video is going to sign on with partners who are combatants with each other. Those customers are not going to pay more for less—but they'll pay for quality work done right the first time."

Another technology, solar photovoltaic development, has now spawned new building-integrated designs for roofing, windows, sunshades and exterior wall materials. This application will continue to evolve because its solar base makes it not only renewable but environmentally beneficial. PV costs are falling, making it more competitive with regular utilities as a reliable power source in the era of utility deregulation.

At the same time, the more traditional electrical work will also continue to grow. Because even the mom and pop stores have to be computer connected, IBEW and NECA have not ignored network installation in the strip mall, residential or other smaller markets.

Similarly, basic materials familiar to IBEW members are not going to be swept away by fiber optics. Copper bandwidth has been greatly expanded, says Jim Boyd, senior director of curriculum development and training at NJATC. Apprenticeship programs have adjusted to the



fact that future IBEW members have to know and be comfortable with materials old and new.

The IBEW has shown its union-wide determination to keep the organized industry competitive against both the nonunion electrical contractor and the new, VDV-only invader called systems contractors.

Salimando says only NECA and IBEW are equipped to become what he calls "the general contractor" for wiring. When teledata work is currently put out to bid, it is part of the electrical contractors standard, Division 16, which encompasses all electrical work. The Construction Specifications Institute changes those standards only every five years and 2002 is the next revision time. The architects and engineers on the institute board will be lobbied to make a new Division 17 for teledata, an illogical move that would presume the customer wants more than one wiring contractor making potentially contradictory decisions on the same job.

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Training

About 10 percent of IBEW's 300,000 construction members were employed in teledata according to the August 1999 IBEW survey. But industry experts say 60,000 electricians are nearing retirement age. In addition to replacing those electricians, experts also predict 50,000 telecommunications technician/installers will be needed in the next 10 years. Thus apprenticeship recruitment will be in constant competition for a new generation steeped in computer technology and smitten with stories of unlimited success in professions related to those computers.

NECA and IBEW have geared up to keep the curriculum of the National Joint Apprenticeship Training Center (NJATC) in step with the future. IBEW apprenticeship is now training for the new classification of installer/technician to arm IBEW construction locals with the specialty skills for VDV.

That program follows the new training program that allows IBEW journeymen to earn certification as Certified Control Systems Technicians—another way in which IBEW training specialists seek to keep IBEW members abreast of new technology in a world dominated by “certifications.”

Organizing

COMET (Construction Organizing Membership Education Training) re-introduced the widespread use of personal, one-on-one, craft-to-craft organizing that requires the involvement of virtually every member. This is how the IBEW achieved its organizing gains. COMET I came off the IBEW drawing board in 1989 and, in a testimonial to its success, was subsequently adopted by other AFL-CIO building trades unions. The program has shown IBEW members that organizing is no threat to their status and shows the larger community that everyone, not just a few union members, stands to gain from an improved quality of life for working people.

To sell the program in every corner of the IBEW, Construction Organizing Director Ron

Burke uses analysis of district-by-district and local-by-local status to show the advantages of vibrant local unions that are organizing and growing. New contractors broaden the spectrum of jobs available to offset the cyclical nature of construction as big jobs open. Growth reaches beyond job openings to benefits like a larger NEBF, which improves the future for all members. Burke shows that current apprenticeship starts alone could not have supplied the members necessary to keep up with the recent IBEW growth, proving continuous organizing is the only alternative to missing out on new contracts.

Today, COMET I has graduated more than 1,600 IBEW members from its “Train the Trainer” program and they in turn have trained 82,000 IBEW members in the program. Now that the “why we organize” message is imbedded, two more programs, called COMET II and SCORE move IBEW officers and members to “how we organize.” SCORE stands for Strategic Construction Organizing Representative Education and helps local union officers plan organizing strategies, techniques and targets best suited to a specific jurisdiction. COMET II equips IBEW members to use what they learned about organizing and join in those campaigns.

In the successful organizing of the previous decade, two particularly effective techniques were developed—the “salting” of



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nonunion jobs by union members and the successful “stripping” of skilled workers from nonunion contractors. With former employees now working out of the union hall, that contractor has the option of becoming signatory to the IBEW agreement. “Salting” was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1995 in an IBEW case in Minnesota that hinged on whether it was legal for a worker receiving a stipend from the union to sign up on a nonunion job. The Supreme Court victory was particularly pleasing for trade unionists aware of the blackball historically used against union supporters by employers in a wide variety of industries.

It’s almost impossible to overemphasize the importance of making new members feel welcome in the IBEW, says IBEW Construction Department Director Mark Ayers. A large part of IBEW organizing success is owed to the help of IBEW members who see the advantages of an “organize, don’t ostracize” attitude.

Word spreads fast, Ayers said, and that welcome at the union hall affects nonunion workers on the next job that may be salted. “Salting works,” Ayers says, and in no small part “that’s because the superior skills of the union-trained worker are immediately recognized and admired

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The National Labor Management Cooperation Committee (NLMCC) is offering four free commercials to IBEW locals interested in using them for their marketing program.

To order the videos call 303-456-6929 or e-mail bob@oswegocreative.com.

IBEW Local 520, Austin, Texas, was involved in creating the 30-second commercials at Oswego Creative of

Wheat, Colorado. NLMCC then purchased the national rights from Oswego in order to make them free to IBEW locals, local LMCCs or NECA chapters wishing to buy the time to air them.

The creators say the four are easily adaptable to fit any area. They promote the expertise, training and teamwork of the IBEW-NECA team.

The four have been used by at least eight IBEW locals in cooperation with NECA chapters. Television ads were once thought too expensive, the NLMCC said, but “the cost of targeted local TV (cable) is not prohibitive and, in fact, relatively inexpensive” among the mix of billboards, publication and transit ads many locals are using in their campaigns.

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on the nonunion job.” Some on the job are flattered to be invited over to the union side because their spotty background in nonunion work leaves doubt in their own mind about where they stand. “Being told they match up brings them new life and new pride on the job,” Ayers says.

The sharp decline in U.S. union membership in construction in the 1960s and 1970s displays the value of the local-wide welcome mat. The post-World War II construction was almost all union until the Eisenhower recession of 1958. With jobs scarce, full union membership was denied to white-ticket holders, or permit hands. Unwelcome as members, they provided nonunion contractors the skilled labor they previously couldn't get. Soon, even the most responsible contractors were going “double-breasted.”

Market Programs

The IBEW and NECA have worked together at the national and local levels through their Labor Management Cooperation Committees (LMCCs) to increase market share by selling quality construction to new customers in aggressive programs. Ayers says every time a local sets up a marketing program, IBEW members recognize the benefits. Advertising programs reach important audiences, including contractors, prospective customers, elected officials and working families, including future candidates for apprenticeship.

“We have been one of the world's best kept secrets,” Ayers says. “The non-union worker should love us. And they do when they're introduced to the effect we have, not just in wages, working conditions and safety, but also in the legislative and legal work on workers compensation, unemployment insurance and practically everything that affects them. Too many people don't know what the union means simply because

they've never been introduced to the difference.”

Market programs are not universal, in part because IBEW has locals that never lost major chunks of their market share in the first place. In St. Louis, for example, residential agreements stayed in effect even in the darkest days of the 1970s when membership in the 15 building trades unions plummeted.

But where market programs have been used, IBEW locals and NECA members have achieved some remarkable results in regaining market share. In Portland, Oregon (see table), the campaign began with funding of 5 cents per hour worked and has now grown to 20 cents which, with the expanded membership, produces a million-dollar annual budget for promoting union construction.

The wider community is often unaware of what union labor-management work on public policy issues has meant to workers in the field. At the federal, state and local levels, NECA and IBEW work on a myriad of codes, regulations, licenses and safety issues and also work together to influence government budgets for public facilities and infrastructure upgrading.

Another factor in keeping the union share of the future market is what International Secretary-Treasurer Hill calls “the collective clout of pension assets.” Hill and other trustees of joint labor-management funds have intensified investment in union construction from plans like the National Electrical Benefits Fund, and Hill is involved in expanding the concept of funding union projects wherever the rules of prudent fiduciary responsibility allow. Additionally, increased activism at annual stockholders meetings are influencing the way construction jobs are bid and how workers are treated.

The Price Is Vigilance

When President Barry declared the “end of gloom and doom” in 1997 he

WHAT MARKET RECOVERY CAN ACHIEVE CHARTING THE SUCCESS STORY OF IBEW LOCAL 48

	1984	Today
Union Contractors	77	125
Market Share	40%	85%
IBEW Members Working	800*	3,200
IBEW Labor Hours	1.2 million	6 million
Apprentices	75	600
*(Working 40% of time)		

also said, “I am not telling you victory is ours. I am not saying the unorganized sector of the economy has folded its tents and gone home. Quite the contrary, they...are fighting back against our initiatives.” He asserts that a permanent effort combining the flexibility to adapt to changing conditions while upholding the enduring standards and principles of the craft will be the only way to ensure that the organized electrical construction industry never again plays second fiddle to the nonunion sector.

And those IBEW construction members nearing retirement age are the backbone of the IBEW in both membership and leadership. Barry paints the image of the hard-working, loyal member: “...a journeyman who has carried a card in his pocket for years, upgraded his skills periodically, and stayed loyal to the union even when others were trying to eat his lunch. That member has helped salt a job to fight the erosion of his standard of living. To the extent that we are entering a better era for our union, I want those members to reap the full rewards that are out there to be won.” It's a daunting task to replace them with future generations of members who sustain the same high level of union commitment.

A prosperous, secure future for IBEW construction members is possible if teamwork on all fronts continues to be as vigorous and as successful as it is at the dawn of the new millennium. ■