

IBEW Construction Membership Reaches All-Time High

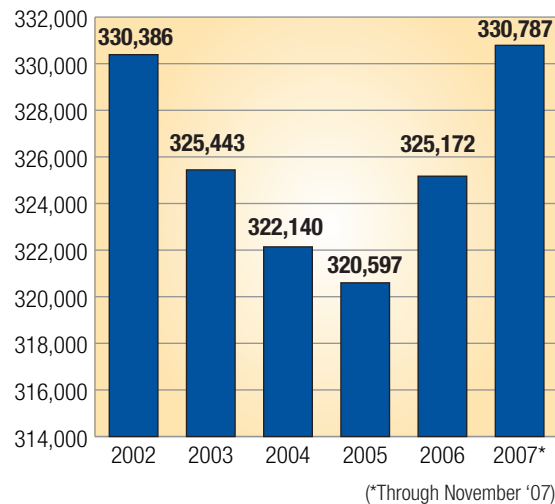
The IBEW's construction membership hit an all-time high of 330,786 in November, surpassing a previous peak in 2002 that was followed by three years of declines.

IBEW leaders attribute the turnaround to a renewed commitment to membership development and a sea change in attitude at every level of the union—from the members and local union leadership to signatory contractors and those who use the services of the contractors.

"Our doors are finally being opened for all levels of the trade," said Buddy Satterfield, Special Assistant to the International President for Organizing, adding that one of the most important changes in the IBEW over the past two years is the addition of two intermediate classifications of wireman: construction electrician and construction wireman. "Different classifications for different levels of skill and pay have allowed our contractors to be much more competitive."

In Florida, the birthplace of the IBEW's modern construction organizing effort, net construction membership is up 13 percent in two years, Satterfield said. Florida is where a new breed of organizer with a new bag of tricks honed skills that are being duplicated around the country, with similarly impressive results. Those tactics include the intermediate classifications which allow for the immediate acceptance of electricians with important skills that do not meet journeyman standards, and a small works agreement that gives contractors more flexibility on smaller jobs. Many of the newer workers are applying for apprenticeship training and journeyman tests.

Turning the Corner: Construction Membership from 2002–2007



The industry night is one of the most successful organizing tactics. They are open houses on neutral ground hosted by the local union and signatory contractors to which nonunion workers are invited to learn about employment opportunities. In city after city, following intensive blitzes of nonunion work-sites, the industry nights are netting new members in record numbers.

In Nashville, Local 429 has picked up 350 new members since January 2007. Membership is up 27 percent and Business Manager Robert Emery Jr. said they are taking in between 75 and 90 new members each month. In Austin, Texas, nonunion employers paid workers overtime and treated them to a barbeque to keep them from attending an industry night. Despite their efforts, 17 new members were hired at the November event.

A 2007 push for the Carolinas has IBEW membership in those states finally increasing. Not only are organizers targeting nonunion workers, they are hitting employers, emphasizing the potential for growth with a skilled IBEW work force behind them. Particularly

appealing to them is the IBEW Code of Excellence, adopted by individual local unions, in which the members agree to high standards of skill and professional performance.

Through his outreach to the Construction Users Round Table (CURT), International President Edwin D. Hill is reaching out to the users of construction services to communicate the advantages of building union.

The IBEW is also enhancing its communications to members and nonmembers with the addition of a new publication, the reader-friendly Electrical Worker newspaper, and its presence on the Internet with IBEW Hour

Power (www.IBEWHourPower.com) and Electric TV (www.ElectricTV.net), which showcase construction members and jobs.

In the other branches of the IBEW, an aggressive new organizing program is underway. Losses in the non-construction branches have finally stopped and are now starting to tick back up again, Satterfield said.

Satterfield said the post-9/11 economic slump hit the construction market especially hard; so did the decline of the domestic manufacturing industry that has accelerated in recent years. That the beginning of the baby boom retirements were hitting the union at the same time.

President Hill said the membership increases could not have been possible without an embrace of new concepts and tactics at the grassroots and local union level.

"The key to the future is to be able to provide the manpower to perform on the projects we know are coming up," Hill said. "If we continue to keep our doors open and seek out the nonunion worker, we're going to be the only game in town." ■