

No Time for Benchw

With this issue, we present the first in a series of columns on a topic that will dominate the news in the United States between now and November 7—the 2000 elections.

Both of us have asserted in speeches, articles and other public statements that this election year will be a watershed, one that determines whether we can make genuine progress for working people in the public policy arena, or struggle mightily just to keep what we have. The outcome will depend largely on one important factor—the participation of working families. The game is underway, and working people need to be on the field.

One of the most heartening developments for our Brotherhood in the new century is that, on many fronts, we have gone over from the defensive posture of the 1980s and 1990s to the offensive—able to devote more time and energy to positive initiatives.

That change has been evident in our workplace relations because our employers, buffeted by a rapidly restructuring economy, have recognized the benefits of a partnership during good economic times and nearly full employment. They see the value of the IBEW superiority in skills and training. Unfortunately, that switch to playing offense has not been possible in public policy, where Congress and many state governments have remained in the stranglehold of those who would prefer a world without unions.

We have a chance to change that. We intend to go over to the offensive and give the prospects for working families a permanent lift by the results of the 2000 elections.

Our members have difficult and sometimes dangerous jobs in which government decisions play a vital role. It's imperative that our members have a voice in the process. One urgent example is in utility restructuring, where the safety and security of our members, as well as reliable customer service, are at risk in government decisions. We cannot plausibly claim to be serving our members responsibly in any of our branches unless we are involved in the critical decisions made at the national, state and local levels of government.

It's probably true that when four people start discussing politics, they can come up with five different opinions. On some political topics, our members disagree, sometimes vigorously. However, on the core issues of the job, the well-being of the labor movement and the national economy, surveys show that union members show overwhelming support, majorities of three-fourths or even more, for their union's position on issues and candidates.

Our problem is participation and

enthusiasm. We know the price of union member indifference. In 1994 we went into an election fresh from two major legislative events. What we wanted, health care reform, we didn't get and what we didn't want, NAFTA, was crammed down our throats. The result was Newt Gingrich and some dark days in Congress. We simply must not let our disgust with the



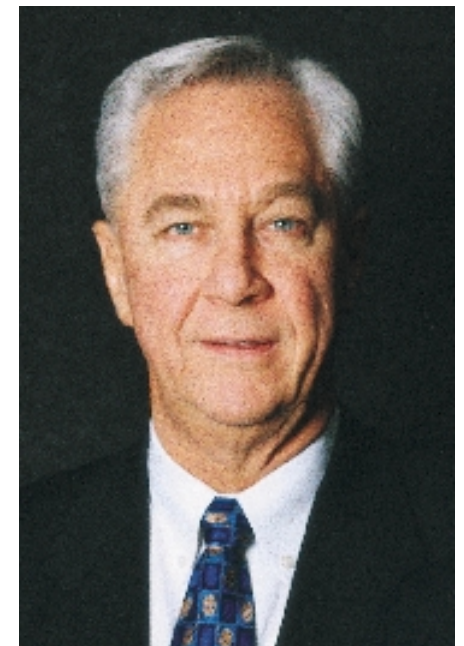
J. J. BARRY
International President

recent China trade vote spawn a repeat of 1994.

Union members didn't vote for the Gingrich-Trent Lott gang; they just didn't vote. In 1994, just 19 percent of the total national vote came from union households. In the next election, that figure jumped to 23 percent. In 1998, union members turned out to vote at a rate 15 points higher than the national average.

This year, our goal is to vote at a level

high enough to win the Presidency and the five House and, possibly, the five Senate seats needed to have a Congress that is responsive to the needs of IBEW families. To that end, we've streamlined IBEW-COPE with the launch of our new PLUG-IN (Political-Legislative Unity Generates Influence Nationwide) program and enrolled IBEW as one of the 23 initial



EDWIN D. HILL
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unions participating in the AFL-CIO Labor 2000 program.

The objective of the IBEW and AFL-CIO Labor 2000 program is to have every member registered, informed about the records of the candidates and given every conceivable encouragement to exercise his or her individual right to vote. Our new structure and attention to detail are unprecedented. We intend to make the results the same.

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