

# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

As I write this, we are fighting a legislative battle that is of major consequence to every IBEW member, indeed every person in North America. The Congress of the United States is considering legislation to impose nationwide rules on the deregulation of the electric utility industry, including a mandate for the introduction of "retail wheeling," that is, the ability of individual consumers to choose their supplier of electricity.

The topic of utility deregulation and restructuring is not a new one to anyone who has even casually glanced at the *Journal* in recent years. Starting about five years ago, our utility members have been fighting this battle in numerous states, in some cases winning significant protections for workers and for the very concept of quality, reliable service. However, the imposition of poorly designed federal legislation would not only undo the good work done by our members in these states, it could have disastrous effects on all consumers.

As I have noted on many occasions, this debate is not about consumer choice any more than last year's fight over "paycheck deception" was about protecting union members. On one side we have forces that want to introduce rapid, radical deregulation of a system that has served the public well for 60 years because it opens the industry up to massive speculation and money-making opportunities. On the other side are those, including the IBEW, who are mounting a concerted effort to ensure that a restructured utility industry will continue to serve both commercial and individual consumers with the high standards of reliability and safety that the public has come to take for granted.

We have long noted that this issue goes far beyond our utility membership, and even beyond the borders of the

United States. Utilities are major users of construction and maintenance work. They use products manufactured by our members. They are major customers of telecommunications companies. They rely on railroads to carry the raw materials needed to provide electricity. And their product powers virtually every facet of the information age. What happens to U. S. utilities will have a great impact in Canada as well. The drive toward privatization in Canada could be shaped significantly by how the debate unfolds in the United States. Deregulation could also affect how U.S. companies use the hydro power supplied from Canada. So let no one think that this is a narrow issue.

I know that the membership of the IBEW is second to none when it comes to political and legislative sophistication. But it can never be said enough that it takes the unified effort consisting of membership involvement, leadership lobbying in Washington, Ottawa and state and provincial capitals, COPE dollars and communication at all levels to generate success in the modern legislative arena. Each ingredient is crucial; we ignore any one of them at our peril.

The Clinton Administration has at long last introduced its utility restructuring legislation on Capitol Hill. Meanwhile, members of the committees handling the issue continue to work on legislation. We are disappointed that the Administration did not include the worker or consumer protections that we have fought for in many states. We must make sure that the standards of quality and reliability which are so important to maintaining the work that our members do are part of any legislation that moves forward. Any bill that passes must be worker friendly, or we will do all in our power to see that no bill passes. ■

## Power Spikes

J. J. BARRY



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# SECRETARY-TREASURER'S MESSAGE

**T**eamwork. It is considered a great virtue in North America. Think of how many times we compliment an athlete, a politician, or even a union brother or sister by saying that he or she is a “good team player.” As trade union members, we obviously believe in the value of working together as a team, and we call it solidarity.

So when management in the various industries represented by the IBEW talks about teamwork, we listen. Sometimes we like what we hear. Sometimes we don't. Many IBEW locals have improved the working lives of their members, increased their voice in the workplace and cemented greater job security through labor-management cooperation. In other cases, management smiles and talks “cooperation,” while planning to reduce jobs, stiff the consumer, and increase their own executive bonuses and perks.

Simply stated, our philosophy on labor-management cooperation is this: We will do whatever is in the best economic and social interest of our members. If management truly considers us partners in creating a stable, mutually beneficial workplace, we will return that good faith. If management would rather treat us as so many impersonal commodities to be shifted about at whim, we will fight with all our strength.

This is worth restating because a recent bizarre twist of events saw a rabidly anti-union group file a complaint with Canada using the labor protection provisions of NAFTA to attempt to subvert United States labor laws. Got that?

The Labor Policy Association (LPA), which lives up to its name only in that it promotes labor relations policies that put all power in management's hands, is using NAFTA to try to resurrect the failed TEAM Act. The TEAM Act was a legislative brainchild of the Republican Congress during the height of its arrogant power. The bill sought to overturn the National Labor Relations Board's ruling that setting up employer-controlled “teams” at unorganized workplaces to discuss matters such as wages and working conditions amounted to the formation of “company unions.” Such sham organizations were outlawed by the National Labor Relations Act in the 1930s. The IBEW and all of organized labor fought hard against the TEAM Act which narrowly passed Congress several times, but ran into a veto by President Clinton.

In a backdoor move that any basketball team would envy, the LPA filed a complaint with the Canadian agency overseeing NAFTA, claiming that the side agreements to the trade pact designed to promote fair treatment of workers, including true labor-management cooperation, are violated because U.S. law does not allow the creation of “teams.” The provisions of NAFTA, weak as they are, have usually been used by American unions to protest the treatment of Mexican workers under that country's ineffective labor laws. Here's the kicker. The LPA in its complaint said, “Employers no longer can remain shackled to the early 20th century labor environment.”

It is an abomination to use a trade agreement that has caused economic dislocation to thousands of workers as a club to beat them even more. The only “shackles” involved in early 20th century labor relations were those around the necks of workers who were struggling to bring the struggling labor movement to life. To file a complaint in Canada, whose social tradition is more respectful of unions than that of the United States, is another twist of the knife.

The LPA will not get away with it. The TEAM Act will not become the law of the United States. And the IBEW will promote true cooperation and forever resist attacks on the rights of working people. ■



## Whose Team?

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