

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

This September 6 marks the last Labor Day of the century in the United States and Canada. Amid all the hype about the end of a millennium, the question for us is: Will the 21st century be a new golden day for labor?

The last two decades of the 20th century were not kind to organized labor. We had to claw back to a position that is relatively good when compared to ten, or even five years ago, when we constantly read stories about layoffs and corporate downsizing. People of all ages, especially workers over 40, were out of work or underemployed. Job security was a thing of the past, we were told.

Now, pick up the paper—or open up a news-oriented web site on the Internet—in 1999, and you hear about low unemployment and shortages of skilled workers.

Our own occupations are affected. The number of journeyman wiremen projected to retire from construction in the next five years is expected to exceed those entering the trade. Linemen are already in short supply; we are seeing utilities and outside contractors competing for each other's workers rather than train their own. Telecommunications companies are scrambling to train technicians because they project a shortage in the next ten years. Railroads need skilled workers of all kinds. Manufacturers have pretty much shipped their unskilled work to Mexico or Asia by now and can't fill jobs that require specific skills. The explosion in broadcast communications has opened up opportunities for technicians in that field.

So we are in a new golden era for labor, especially the kind of skilled workers who belong to our union, right? Not so fast.

We have climbed long and hard to get where we are. We deserve a breather, but only a brief one. It is a short but extremely painful drop from full books to a full bench in the hiring hall. It is a relatively small step from secure, well compensated jobs in vital industries to plant closings, massive restructuring, outsourcing and lost jobs.

In the modern economy, there are no safe havens. The lost jobs or substandard pay and benefits in one segment of the

economy will eventually lead to less work and downward wage pressure for us. We are all connected by the money chain, so we'd better also be connected by equally strong bonds of labor solidarity.

We learned something about ourselves in the past 20 years. We saw the kind of strength that this union has. We proved we are resilient. Now we have to prove we're resourceful enough to take advantage of opportunities to come.

Regular readers of the *IBEW Journal* have seen many of my columns devoted to the importance of organizing and training. We know that our ability to bargain effectively as a union depends on how well we accomplish these tasks. We must speak for an increasing number of workers so that our collective voice becomes stronger. And we must build upon the IBEW's long tradition of training to provide every member with the opportunity to develop the skills needed to succeed in the high tech world of the future.

We do our best work when we combine the proud traditions of the IBEW with the talents and intelligence that is inherent in our union. It has become something of an axiom in the IBEW that we can't solve tomorrow's problems with yesterday's answers. Only through constant re-evaluation and planning can we keep up with the pace of the modern world. Only through using our best resource—our minds—will we find the ways to get the best for our members in the 21st century.

I have no doubt that we will continue to work together, in unity, to do what's necessary to keep our Brotherhood strong and proud in a new century.



Labor's Day?

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