

New Challenges Demand New Solutions

IBEW LEADER CHARTS ENERGY FUTURE

BY EDWIN D. HILL

IN 2012, WHEN A HURRICANE HITS

Florida or an ice storm pounds Chicago will enough qualified personnel be available to keep the power running? Numerous industry experts conclude that the answer might be no.

Workforce levels in the electric utility industry have dropped more than 20 percent since 1990, while power generation has increased by more than 30 percent. A little less than half of the industry's roughly 400,000 workers are eligible for retirement in the next five to 10 years, without nearly enough recruits to take their place. And it's not just people. The average age of power transformers in service is 40 years, which also happens to be the average lifespan of this equipment. Combine the



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crying need for maintenance with a shrinking workforce, and we may find that the 2005 blackout that affected parts of Canada and the northeastern United States might have been a dress rehearsal for what's to come.

Deregulation and restructuring of the industry created downward pressure on recruitment, training and maintenance, and the bill is now coming due. But how we got here is less important than where we as an industry will go now.

I believe this is one of those moments when challenges can beget new opportunities. We can thrive and meet the demand for electricity if we take the right steps now.

First, there needs to be a common understanding that recruitment, training and retention of a qualified workforce constitute priority number one. Industry leaders must resist the siren call of cheap labor that has gutted much of our industrial base. Investment in a high-quality, highly skilled workforce is essential to the long-term health of the industry.

Across North America, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers has partnered with local, state and provincial leaders to create pre-apprenticeship programs to attract students and young workers to the trade. We are also seeking to establish our own training centers at two locations in the West where we plan to establish an apprenticeship program that can be utilized by employers from across the continent.

Second, we need to look at initiatives that can help our industry shape the debate on the future. AEP President Mike Morris and I co-authored an editorial proposing that the United States work with nations around the world to agree on emission standards. Goods imported from countries that do not participate in such an agreement, including rapidly growing nations like China and India, would be subject to a duty to ensure that they do not have an unfair trade advantage. This proposal is now part of legislation introduced in the U.S. Senate and could help secure the long-term economic and environmental health of our nation. The IBEW is also working to convene a national Labor and Management Political Action Committee meeting, in the belief that the time is right for stakeholders to come together to develop a common strategy.

Third, we need to move beyond the contentious labor-relations climate that has been all too common in the industry for the last 15 years. It's time for a new era of partnership in which the skills, experience and input of the workforce are valued. I have been spreading the message to our membership that we need to renew our commitment to safety, a strong work ethic and a positive attitude on the job, just as we are doing in our construction branch. We want to create an atmosphere of mutual respect between labor and management in our industry and intend to live up to our part.

Writing the next chapter in the history of the electric utility industry will not be easy. I am convinced, however, that if we confront our challenges in a new spirit of partnership and a commitment to excellence, we will emerge a stronger industry, an engine that will continue to power the economy of North America.

Edwin D. Hill is president of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, representing 725,000 workers including 220,000 at utilities in the United States and Canada.

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