

5 Main Objections To Organizing

Comments

1. New members add to unemployment in the local.

Unrepresented electrical workers already have “our jobs.” The objection, or some of its many variations, is a legitimate concern current members have. Because unrepresented workers are employed at substandard wages, they enjoy a competitive advantage over union members, especially when there are a limited number of jobs. The existence of substandard conditions within a local’s jurisdiction always threatens the union wage structure. Members have a better chance of avoiding unemployment if they compete for jobs on the level playing field of uniform standards for all electrical workers. Also, newly organized workers can stay at their current jobs and newly organized contractors can expand the employment opportunities of members.

2. Nonunion workers lack sufficient skills.

First, if this is true, the union can provide skill upgrading for new members to maintain and deepen the union’s skill level. (It would be good for current members to participate in such programs as well.) Second, this objection reflects a basic misperception of the skill level in the open shop. An honest look at the scope and nature of current nonunion jobs demonstrates that the open shop possesses sufficient skill to complete a job of any size and complexity. Union members need to recognize the changed reality: the IBEW no longer enjoys a monopoly of construction skills. The challenge now is to regain that monopoly through organizing.

3. Conditions on union jobs will deteriorate.

In some cases conditions that members have come to view as entitlements of union membership reflect abuses that have weakened the vitality of union contractors. But in other cases union conditions have been fought for over many generations, and it is appropriate to be concerned about protecting and preserving those conditions. However, in general, newly organized electrical workers who have endured the exploitative conditions of the open shop welcome union conditions and oftentimes appreciate them more sincerely than do some of our current members. To the limited extent that newly organized members might tend to accept substandard conditions on union worksites (and the evidence indicates that this is very uncommon!), they can be educated by current members in a fraternal spirit of solidarity.

4. New members have no commitment to the union

Commitment and loyalty are personal qualities that have little to do with whether a person is union or nonunion. Newly organized members are often more committed to the union, more passionate and more active than members who came into the union with a sense of entitlement. Some take considerable risks or make real sacrifices to join the IBEW; their experience through organizing engenders a true spirit of unionism, a strong dose of which might benefit some of our current members. Some locals have tracked the careers of members brought in through organizing: the overwhelming majority sticks with the IBEW in good times and bad.

5. New members are getting into the local through the back door.

Any electrical worker who's spent much time in the open shop has paid their dues by working for lower wages and under worse conditions. Serving an apprenticeship is not a punishment; it's a privilege. The current member who was lucky enough to receive formal training should enjoy a competitive advantage over an electrical worker who was denied such an opportunity when both are competing on a level playing field. The most important response to the "back door" objection is this: organizing is designed to protect and enhance the benefits of union representation regardless of which union door one enters.