

SUPPLEMENTAL TIME LINE FOR COMET

1935: Congress passes the Wagner Act, more commonly known as the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). The Act for the first time guaranteed the rights of workers to form and join unions and to bargain collectively. In addition, it allowed for engaging in concerted activities, including strikes, in support of these demands. The Act defined activities in which employers could no longer engage in their efforts to thwart unions. Engaging in any of these illegal activities would constitute an Unfair Labor Practice (ULP). Many employers refused to acknowledge the Act and it was not until 1937, when the Supreme Court ruled the Act constitutional, that organized labor was able to benefit from the protections it provided.

1947: Congress passes the Taft-Hartley Act, also referred to as the Labor Management Relations Act (LMRA), or “the Act, as amended.” The Taft-Hartley Act expanded the illegal activities covered by the Act to include those that could be committed by Unions. It is significant to note that there are twice as many activities barred for Unions as there are for employers.

The most significant, and harmful aspect of the LMRA was the outlawing of “closed shops.” Prior to 1947, Union Security Clauses requiring that all workers become and remain members of the union in order to work for the employer were enforceable. This is no longer the case. In addition, Taft-Hartley gave states the right to pass “Right-to-Work” laws. Of the 22 states that passed “Right-to-Work” laws, not one of them has an average income level above that of the national average.

1950’s – 70’s: IBEW Locals begin administering proficiency exams to determine the “qualifications” of prospective. Remember that prior to this time, the only qualifications to joining the IBEW was that you were gainfully employed in the industry and had not trouble remaining so (you had a job and you could keep it). The impetus behind this disingenuous concern over qualifications was the fear of creating competition for “my” job.

This period of time also gave rise to the formation of the F.B.I. requirements within the IBEW. This required that your **F**ather, **B**rother, or an **I**n-law was already a member in order for you to join. In this manner, we could ensure that only “True Blue” people were joining our organization.

This inbreeding mentality to membership growth left us and our employers with an insufficient number of skilled tradespersons to accomplish the work that was available. Instead of simply bringing in more apprentices and/or allowing those that were already engaged in the industry to join us, it was decided to create a new classification of worker known as the “White Ticket” or “Permit Hand.” These individuals worked under our collective bargaining agreements and learned the trade through OJT only. They did not attend school with our apprentices. They learned the trade from the best and as a

result we created a pool of very qualified journeyman electricians. The only thing we did not give them was membership. Again, the impetus for this ingenious idea was to keep them from competing with “me” for a job when things slowed down. And things did slow down. Many economic factors (i.e., oil embargo, double digit interest rates) led to multiple, severe downturns in construction spending during the 70’s and 80’s. It was at this time that we turned away the very individuals who had worked side by side with us and whom we had trained and told them to do something other than electrical work. In some instances these individuals were within months of vesting in some of our pension plans and when we turned them away they told the world that the Union had stolen their pensions. While from a legal standpoint this is incorrect, from a moral standpoint it is true.

1980’s: Our answer to competing with the very individuals that we had trained and turned away was to take wage cuts. It took months for these give backs and foregone raises to be negotiated/implemented. The nonunion was able to roll their employees’ wages back in one day. The Union can never win a race to the bottom because the nonunion can get there quicker.

In the face of massive unemployment, we denied our contractors the one thing that needed more than ever – apprentices. Most Locals respond to slow times by not bringing any new apprentices in. Signatory contractors need apprentices more than ever in economic down turns in order to lower their composite rates when bidding against nonunion contractors paying lower wages and little to no benefits. This leads to even more unemployment for journeymen as our contractors are now less likely to pick up any new work.

But the problem is even greater than that. While there are always going to be “booms and busts” in the construction industry, continued advancements in technology and the simple fact that the population is always growing means an ever increasing need for construction. When we decided to bring in apprentices at a rate equivalent to the number of people that are retiring (and many Locals were/are using this as a target), we were losing market share every day. In referencing Handout #3 you can see that from 1983 – 1994 our membership numbers were stagnant. This, despite the fact that we were once again organizing new members, illustrates that we were retiring at a significantly greater rate than we were bringing people into our apprenticeship. Absent organizing, we were retiring ourselves out of existence.

Conclusion: The vision of our Founding Fathers was to organize all those working within our trade into our Brotherhood. While we followed this vision we were able to grow and provide for our members the wages and dignity that they so richly deserve. Every time we have deviated from this very simple equation, it has backfired. Every membership-restrictive policy we implemented was nothing less than a selfish attempt to protect “my” job. While wearing these short-sighted glasses, we failed to see that it is better to have 10 unemployed electricians competing at Union wages and benefits for one job than to have 1 unemployed union member competing against 9 unemployed

electricians that work for less than Union wages and benefits for that same job. Nobody wins in a race to the bottom.

The IBEW, and other building trades unions, created the non union competition that we face today. There is no argument on this matter. Plain and simple, we caused it and we continue to pay the price for it. If we are to overcome this, we must organize. When we reach the 80-90% market share that we once enjoyed, it is incumbent on each of you here today to remember the mistakes of past generations and ensure that they never happen again.