

Lessons of Seattle “Limited Energy” Strike

What Way Forward for the IBEW

Earlier this year, the IBEW Local 46 Limited Energy (LE) unit in Seattle waged a ten-week strike. This collective action captured the attention of union members far beyond the Puget Sound region, especially among those in the IBEW’s lower tiers. LE electricians earn substantially less than inside wiremen and, like much of this country’s urban working class, are not able to live where they work. They walked off the job in April to pry what they needed from the hands of the NECA employers. When the dust settled, though, they had been made to accept a contract that contained a below-inflation wage increase and *no* paid time off. It is important to understand *why* this happened in order to chart a way forward for the union.

On one level, it is not so hard to figure out what went wrong. Despite the fighting spirit of the 1,000-strong Local 46 LE electricians, they could not escape injury from the double-barrel shotgun of the union’s tiers, which pit one unit against another, and the Project Labor Agreements (PLAs), which ban any strike activity. This shotgun was wielded by the Local 46 leadership in service to the NECA bosses, and it proved fatal to the LE unit’s strike.

At the strike’s outset, the Local 46 business manager declared: “No more second-class citizens! No more big unit here, little unit there.” But these fine words found no reflection in the conduct of the strike. The IBEW leadership had apprentices *cross the picket lines* and, in the name of abiding by the PLAs and the equivalent Community Workforce Agreements with the City of Seattle, had at least one-quarter of LE electricians *stay on the job*. The picket lines were kept small and extremely porous and limited to a handful of job

sites at any one time. A strike is a class battle. If the union does not rally all its own forces, much less its working-class allies in the rest of the trades and beyond, to shut things down, it is all but surrendering in advance because the bosses are not going to show similar restraint.

The LE electricians fought the best they could under the circumstances and voted by wide margins to reject multiple contract proposals—until the union bureaucracy served up the final offer and called an end to the strike before a vote was taken. By that point, the inside wiremen’s contract had expired, but they were to remain on the job at all costs. NECA threw some extra money their way while rebuffing calls to address work rule and safety concerns. So, the inside wiremen (IW) lost out, too. Here is the problem of the tiers and PLAs in a nutshell for the IBEW across the country: The union is left weaker and every electrician worse off.

Boosting NECA Weakens the IBEW

It does not have to be like this. But to find the way out, it is necessary to dig deeper to the root of the problem. The IBEW’s overall trajectory is indistinguishable from that of organized labor as a whole. The triumph of the U.S. ruling class as the world’s sole superpower a few decades ago was accompanied by a war on labor and a push for globalization—which hollowed out the country’s manufacturing base. The IBEW and other unions were put back on their heels, and bitterly anti-union outfits went on the march. The reaction of the IBEW bureaucracy was—and remains—to bind the union ever more closely to the NECA employers in order to

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head off the mortal threat posed by the contractors who never hire union labor.

As a result, many new tiers, like the Construction Electricians/Construction Wiremen (CE/CWs), were introduced and the PLAs spread like wildfire, all to win union jobs and bring new members into the IBEW. What has been the result? Over this period, the share of union work in the electrical industry has dropped *fourfold*, and the union is divided in almost every imaginable way: IW vs. LE vs. CE/CW, local vs. local, white vs. black, men vs. women, to name a few.

The contractors hire cheaper CE/CWs to perform work that previously would have gone to inside wiremen, and the CE/CWs in turn resent their limited prospects of ever moving up in the union. The lower tiers—CE/CW, LE and the like—are very much treated like second-class citizens, as are travelers in higher-paying locals, like San Francisco's Local 6. Historically excluded from the IBEW altogether, today black workers are heavily confined to the lower tiers, replicating their segregation at the bottom of society. Racial segregation has long been an invaluable tool for the bosses—allowing them to keep the black population in wretched conditions and use that as a battering ram against white workers.

Organizing the unorganized is a burning question. But the IBEW is throttling itself, and looking more and more like a non-union operation every day thanks to its leadership's commitment to making NECA as competitive as possible in the contractors' bidding wars. Practices like spinning (turning back those dispatched by the union hall) and "at-will hiring" (permitting layoffs on any grounds) give the employers the final say on hiring. This further fuels divisions inside the union and erodes safety on the job—as the bosses inevitably weed out union militants, safety advocates and black and women workers. Market recovery programs and targeting funds are outright union subsidies of NECA and drive down everyone's take-home pay, while being touted as effective organizing tools.

Whatever short-term jobs are gained, it is *not* worth the cost of keeping the union locked in a downward spiral. Take the PLAs, the centerpiece of the union bureaucracy's organizing strategy. Increasingly desperate to slow the union's slide, IBEW leaders are increasingly approaching developers with union-inspired PLA proposals. In addition to their no-strike clauses, the PLAs often contain local hiring provisions, which undermine the union hiring hall while claiming to promote "diversity and inclusion." For example, the City of Seattle's CWAs mandate the hiring of workers from "economically distressed zip codes" as Priority Workers. Black and women workers are concentrated in such specially designated labor pools, which often constitute the union's lower tiers. This must be changed. Their status brings down the entire union and is the source of heightened racial and other animosities among the union ranks. Some organizing! The PLAs are usually negotiated by liberal Democratic Party politicians, including Biden/Harris on the federal level, to paint themselves as "pro-union" and "pro-diversity" when in reality they are lighting the powder keg that can only blow apart the IBEW.

For a Fighting IBEW that Unites All Electricians!

Clinging to NECA will be the downfall of the IBEW—the union can regain strength only by standing on its own two feet. There must be a serious effort to organize the unorganized across the board not by granting concessions to NECA,

but by taking the fight to the contractors. Non-union job sites should be picketed and shut down while making the case for union membership to the electricians working there and opening the IBEW's door to them. Such a fight would have to be consciously organized to counter the pressure of the sweet-tasting PLA poison and the bosses' sweet-talking Democratic and Republican politicians. Then it would be able to not only inject fresh blood into the union, but also propel its transformation into a class-independent force to secure the needs of all electricians and the broader working class.

Making the IBEW into an organization that non-union electricians feel compelled to join requires a parallel fight to counter the divisions inside the union. The tiers must be abolished, and equal pay and benefits for equal work at the highest level established for all electricians irrespective of specialty and location. All practices that discriminate against travelers, the CE/CWs and other lower tiers, black workers and women must be rooted out. *No second-class citizens!*

To cut through the bosses' divide-and-rule "diversity" schemes and solidify the bonds between the IBEW and the multiracial working class as a whole, the union must establish full control over hiring, together with union-run, NECA-paid recruitment and training programs for black people and women. An important step toward putting hiring—and safety—under the union's purview would be to fight to abolish spinning and "at-will hiring." Jobs for all could be ensured by striving to reduce the length of the work day at no loss in pay, so even the most senior inside wiremen benefit from shared work.

The Local 46 LE electricians should be saluted for sticking out their necks *against* NECA. Their defeat will not have been in vain if rank-and-file IBEW electricians answer the call to try to clear the PLAs and tiers from the path of union struggle. The demonstrated determination of militant electricians to wage this fight and organize the unorganized would point the way forward to winning the war—having the working class run industry and society as well. With that in mind, we propose the following program for IBEWers:

- **Organize the unorganized through class-struggle methods! Down with the PLAs! Picket lines mean don't cross!**
- **Abolish all tiers! Equal pay and benefits for equal work at the highest levels for all! No second-class union members!**
- **For union control of hiring and safety! No spinning or "at-will hiring"! Union-run, company-paid minority recruitment and training programs!**
- **No reliance on Democrats and Republicans! For a workers party that fights for the interests of our class!**