

2015 IBEW Membership Development Conference

“Positioned for Success”

September 14-18, 2015

Submitted by Mary Williamson

Last month I attended the 2015 IBEW Membership Development Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada. This year's conference was the largest on record with over 1700 delegates from all over Canada and the United States.

The conference theme was “Positioned for Success” which helped set the tone for many of the plenary sessions and workshops. This was truly the case with the opening remarks made by Ricky Oakland, Special Assistant to the International President, where he focused on the gains the IBEW has made with respect to meeting our carrying out our highest priority which is to “organize all workers in the entire electrical industry in the United States and Canada”. For instance, this is the second year in that our union has made membership gains, “...despite all of the challenges and formidable odds, our union is bigger today and we shouldn't be afraid to celebrate”, Oakland said.

He went on to say that although there are “still lots of challenges and lots to do, there are infinite opportunities that lie ahead – we are just getting started”. The take home message was a positive one - we are positioned well to keep on growing our union.

Later in the conference Oakland set some organizing goals for the IBEW:

1. Sign up 75% of workers currently under our agreements
2. Increase average “A” Membership by 3% (up from 2%)
3. Organize 1.5% more in non -construction locals.

Our International President, Lonnie Stephenson, built on Oakland's remarks and the IBEW's ability to achieve success reminding the delegates how far we've come in just five years - a time when the future looked bleak and we were just trying to survive. He said,

"today we're turning a new page, we've achieved two straight years of membership gains and are at an all time high of "A" Memberships (1st District had most new "A" members). We're not just playing defence now, we're on the verge of living up to our goal of organizing every worker in the electrical industry".

A lot of the IBEW's success is attributed to a stronger economy, but Stephenson stressed that's not enough - we have to use the organizing tools and strategies available to us in order to keep growing. Now is not the time to rest.

He said we must recruit workers that are already close to us, and open doors to potential members. There are currently 27,000 non-members working under IBEW Contracts. It is our job to tell existing and potential members how important it is to be a member and that "it is unions that help ensure their members can buy cars and houses - that comes from the contract, not the company".

Liz Schuler, Secretary Treasurer of the AFL-CIO, had a message that "working people need to build power with a union". Schuler believes we should be talking more about our strengths and engage the millennials - it's predicted that by 2025, they will be 75% of the global workforce. Polling tells us that 60% of millennials are in favour of unionism. Schuler's ask was for us to pledge to "reach out to at least one young worker and invite them in".

During the Canadian Caucus, the new organizing policy was reviewed and it was announced that starting in March 2016, Local Unions will have to submit reports on current union density. Reports will be filed in March and September.

Reports on organizing activities across the country were given.

In addition to the above, the conference provided a number of other informative sessions that I attended that were focused on organizing for Professional and Industrial, panel discussion, and motivational speakers.

I thoroughly enjoyed my experience and feel that I returned home with new ideas and renewed optimism with respect to the future of unionism. I would like to thank the IBEW Local 37 for the opportunity to attend this very valuable conference.