

Why Are Unions Important in 2023: Union Organizing in the IBEW

Monday, April 17th 2023 – 6:00 to 7:30pm – IBEW Local 270 Oak Ridge

Derek Guy shared his work as a Union Organizer for the IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers), the importance of unions as a bulwark in today's generally anti-labor environment, and the differences in the experiences (and benefits) of working as an IBEW wireman vs. the non-union experience. Derek was joined by Daniel Smith, the elected head of the IBEW Local 270.



The IBEW is run as a democracy, with the head of the Local elected from the membership. The Local runs with a limited staff in the office, an organizer, and two people to run the apprenticeship program.

There are quite a few benefits of union membership; some of which were new to many of the attendees. The Union values the individual workers as people who want to be safe in their jobs, earn a good wage, have security, and be treated as intelligent people who have value. The Union provides tools for their members, unlike non-union workers who have to provide their own tools, and they have the specialized tools and safety gear that allows their members to be safe in dangerous situations.

The Local organizes approximately 100 people a year. After passing competency testing and proving they have the required number of hours, they are brought in as full Journeyman Wireman. Union members are nearly guaranteed employment as the Union works with contractors directly to staff those Union jobs. There are three local contractors who are union shops, and they get outbid often by non-Union companies. However, the Union contractors that work with Local 270 have about 15 years of work currently in the pipeline. When the Legislature accepts the Federal funding, the Union contractors will be able to get to work installing EV charging stations all across the state – and the IBEW members are trained and ready for the work. The stipulation of Union contractors for Federal projects depends, however, on the party controlling the White House. Our current administration asks for, and listens to, input from IBEW and other Unions.

If a person wants to try out a different part of the country they can simply go to the Local in their new town and fold into that workforce. They take their seniority, wages, and benefits with them to the new Local. They also take their health insurance and their retirement accounts with them. The IBEW retirement vests after 5 years, and for those who begin with the Apprenticeship Program that clock starts on the first day of their apprenticeship.

Apprentices are paid to work as they amass the required hands-on hours (\$13.50 to start with increases each year to \$25.50 in the 5th year), they have nearly free classroom training, come out of the program with a life-long profession, and have approximately \$100,000 in their retirement account immediately on graduating from the program. And no student debt. There are currently 163 people in the Apprenticeship Program at Local 270 – with 30-35 starting each year. The Union has some difficulty presenting at the local high schools during their career days, with the schools being afraid of backlash in this East Tennessee non-Union environment. If you know a sharp hard-working high schooler please let them know to check out this option.

Around 10% of the people in the Apprenticeship Program are women. Regina Guy went through the program and worked as a Journeyman Wireman before transitioning to a work planning position (also with the Union). She confirms that women can physically do the work, the other Union workers steer clear of the harassment so often found in the trades, and it is a great profession for young women to enter. The Union fully embraces equal pay for equal work.