

Excerpts from:

Address of Edwin D. Hill
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to the IBEW Broadcasting, Manufacturing and Telecommunications Conference
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[In the past] I have used the comparison of the IBEW as a huge tow boat with a lot of barges in the middle of the Ohio River attempting to turn around and reverse course. It's still true.

Right now -- our boat is sideways in the river. We have done the first part by fighting the current to begin our turn. Now, we're in a sideways position where we can either follow through and reverse direction or get swept away by the current. The outcome of the story and the future of our union the -- IB of EW depend on all of us.

Institutions don't change easily, brothers and sisters. And in this -- our 115th year of existence -- the IBEW is an institution. We have more than a century of growth, structure and organization behind us. And, for the most part, it has served us well.

But can any of us truly say that as the 20th century drew to an end that we were pleased with our status? We had some brief periods of prosperity and promise in the late 1990s that masked some of the pain and gave us some short-term upticks in employment and opportunity. But as we stand here in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, we are confronted with a difficult truth -- that we must make our own opportunity and forge our own plan of action that can withstand the political, social and economic forces that threaten to overwhelm us.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of President Ronald Reagan's firing of the air traffic controllers -- who dared to strike against what they saw as unfair treatment by their employer -- the federal government. At that time, many in organized labor thought that a dispute involving a small federal union wasn't that important. Well, we all know what happened. The smashing of the air traffic controllers strike was a revolutionary step that emboldened employers in all sectors of the economy. If one government agency could get rid of its union -- the corporate leaders thought -- then why can't I? Or at least I can keep unions from getting any bigger or more powerful. And the employers did just that.

There was another side to the air traffic controllers' strike that many unions don't like to talk about, but we cannot ignore it. The incident exposed a fault line in American labor. It uncovered the disconnect that existed between working people and the trade union movement. Working men and women forgot that they achieved middle class status because they stood together under a union banner and fought back against the corporate greed and one-sided power that gave us the Great Depression. Workers themselves and unions as institutions seemed to forget our roots -- that being -- it was when the rank and file acted as a movement that the lives of ordinary working men and women -- that is us Brothers and Sisters -- became better.

We have experienced that first hand. I think almost all of us in this room remember when jobs in manufacturing, broadcasting and telecommunications were among the most stable and sought after in the North American economy. Now -- our industries are as beset with uncertainty as any in the U.S. and Canada. Is there anybody here who hasn't felt the wrath of members who were angry and upset over this? Is there anybody here -- who hasn't at times turned that wrath toward the International? And we -- in turn -- rail against the corporations and the right-wing politicians.

The old days are gone and don't appear to be coming back anytime soon. But that doesn't mean that we can't create a new reality in these industries and a future where skill and hard work are rewarded. But we are not going to achieve that with yesterday's answers, yesterday's structure or yesterday's attitudes. This boat that we are riding won't keep turning by itself -- it is going to take new ideas and a renewed commitment on everyone's part. We are going to have to turn against the tide -- or sail against the wind as Senator Ted Kennedy said so eloquently some 26 years ago.

The diversity of our trades has been what has set the IBEW apart, and it will continue to give us strength as we move forward and confront all obstacles.

This understanding is the essential first step in building our future, but it is only the first step. We must have the will to keep moving forward.

In manufacturing, the decline of the North American industrial base is well documented. The devastation at Delphi, Ford and General Motors are only the latest manifestation of the unbalanced trade policies and total lack of corporate vision that have taken a fearsome toll on working families. Unfortunately, we are all too familiar with that in our manufacturing branch. Once you could find hundreds of consumer products made by our members. Today, we are struggling to hold on at our Hoover vacuum cleaner plant in North Canton, Ohio and our GE refrigerator plant in Bloomington, Indiana. Our members in Tennessee are doing pretty well -- manufacturing microwave ovens and solar panels for Sharp; while the jobs of those producing large-size DLP televisions sets for Toshiba are once again being threatened by our flawed trade policies, -- and I say once again -- because in December of 2005 Toshiba ceased production of projection TV's resulting in a layoff of 300 of our members. The only remaining production line is the DLP TV's. These will become obsolete once the price comes down on the LCD TV's which is expected to occur within the next three years. The LCD TV's are manufactured in Mexico and our department is working hard to bring the assembly of the TV's to Lebanon Tennessee -- however there is a tariff levied on the screen when brought into the US for assembly. But if the TV is assembled in Mexico and brought into the US there is no tariff. We will be working with the Legislative Department and the Manufacturing Department to see if it is feasible to tackle this issue in Congress.

We have seen the broadcasting industry move away from the employment model that allowed us to thrive in years past. As the media become more and more controlled by a few corporate giants, the same cost pressures and emphasis on the bottom line that have devastated other industries have come into play. This has resulted in the increasing use of

freelance and other temporary workers at the expense of staff jobs with full benefits. In addition, newer and better digital technologies continue to make it easier for employers in the broadcasting industry to eliminate our work through things like “station hubbing” and “tapeless” work environments. No longer is it acceptable to learn one skill, perfect it and expect to be set for the rest of your career. The hard fact is that our membership must work diligently to continuously keep up their job skills in this ever-changing world.

Like many other industries -- telecommunications has seen mergers become the norm and as we see continuing with the latest being the AT&T purchase of Bell South for \$67 Billion. The great irony is that Ma Bell seems to be pulling herself together again after the vaunted breakup that created her baby bells and the long distance companies. Today, we are left with Verizon, which has absorbed MCI; -- AT&T, the mixture of SBC and the old AT&T, -- and Sprint, which has taken over Nextel while spinning off its land line business as Embark. We also have companies such as Frontier, Citizens and Alltel with their regional markets. These companies compete with the cable giants, most notably Comcast, Cox, Charter and Time Warner which remain as fiercely anti-union as ever. And even our traditional employers' act just like the cable companies when it comes to resisting our effort to organize in wireless. The only exception is Cingular, which is the domain of the CWA. Our traditional land line and long distance work is rapidly becoming the poor end of the market, -- especially as voice-over-Internet makes great strides. We have made some gains in installing broadband networks,-- but fiber optics are not like the old copper lines -- they are far less labor intensive to maintain and practically repair themselves.

And through it all -- our members feel the fear and insecurity that has run through so much of the economy, not only in North America but throughout the world.

Our choice is simple: do we fight, or do we give up? If we want to fight -- and I take your presence here to indicate that you choose that option -- then are we willing to take the steps necessary to succeed? Are we willing to think -- and then more importantly act differently than in the past? Are you willing to step up and lead in your locals and show our members that they need to be part of the solution?

The opportunity is there Brothers and Sisters. There is still a strong manufacturing base in North America -- with many plants that need union representation. We have the potential to expand our base in the business-to-business products. There are thousands of workers in a broadcasting industry that keeps expanding through cable channels and Internet programming. There are ample opportunities for telecom technicians, operators and service reps -- and the wireless and cable workforces still need to be organized. The potential to achieve the vibrant, occupationally diverse IBEW that we envision -- is ours to realize.

We will not win with old ways and old tactics. If our structure does not change, then all the talk in the world will do no good. If we don't lift our eyes to look beyond the walls of our own plants or facilities -- then we will be stuck in the same old rut. If we make suicide runs at units where management has intimidated a work force that has not been

prepared to win by organizers who know the industry, then we are doomed to repeat the cycle of failure.

The worst part of this cycle has occurred because we have not been able to move beyond the fact that our current International organizing staff is not deep enough -- to go after a significant amount of the targets in telecommunications, manufacturing and broadcasting. At the same time, our locals in these industries have been primarily concerned with negotiating contracts with their employer, processing grievances and local administration. Many of our locals in these industries don't have the resources to hire staff to go after new units. We also find that even locals in the same metropolitan area don't communicate with each other, creating a fragmentation that undermines our purpose as a union. I have come to the conclusion that only by redirecting resources and making some structural changes will we be able to break the cycle.

We are going to create organizing councils in selected geographic areas within each state. We are going to start by setting up councils in a few regions on a trial basis. The councils will be directed by new staff hired through the International and be charged with coordinating all organizing in the utility, telecommunications, broadcasting, manufacturing, government and railroad branches in their assigned jurisdiction. Critical to our success will be our ability to hire staff out of each respective branch who can speak the lingo shared by unorganized workers in those industries. Equally important will be our ability to mobilize our existing members to volunteer to help with organizing campaigns in their areas. Experience has shown that no one is more effective at communicating with the unorganized than those who work in the same industry.

In the best traditions of unionism -- we want to combine our resources and strength to improve our collective well being. The International will make a substantial investment to bring these councils about, but they will also be funded by locals within each area. This will maximize the impact of each dollar spent and ensure that returns flow to each region. There may be times when your particular local's dues dollar helps a sister local gain members. You still gain because each unionized work place in your area reduces the downward pressure on wage and benefits and helps make the Brotherhood stronger in all our industries.

Secretary-Treasurer Walters, the Vice presidents, the IEC members and I discussed these councils at length during the officers' meeting held in early February. The regions within the respective states will be developed after researching the number of potential members in our industries within each area. We are not rushing into this blindly.

I am sure -- like all new systems -- our organizing councils will need tweaking here and there. But the main point is that we need a new approach to organizing in our industrial branches because the old ways have not worked and will not work without substantial changes. We need the increased clout that greater union density will bring in all of our industries. We need the stronger collective voice in bargaining and legislative and political action that comes about from growing our membership. We have no future if we do not organize -- now is time to take bold steps to make this happen.

Another important step we are taking is the creation of a national health care plan in the IBEW. Secretary-Treasurer Walters will be talking about this in greater detail. The plan is being rolled out primarily in the construction branch because the multi-employer, labor-management administered plans common in that industry can most easily be switched over. Negotiating with corporations to join a national plan -- as we have found with the Sav-RX program -- takes more time and lot more convincing. But we are determined to make this a genuine benefit that can help our members in all branches.

The national plan takes on more significance when one looks at the long term in many of our industries, particularly in telecommunications and broadcasting and to a lesser degree Manufacturing. As we see the traditional employment model breaking down -- there is a far greater need to reach out to those who work for companies as freelancers or contractors. Having a national health plan -- to go along with our national pension plan -- to offer these workers can be a powerful organizing tool.

We have to be ready for the future Brothers and Sisters. Perhaps the most important change, however -- must come from within. I have spent a great deal of time in recent years talking about the need for us to step back from our constant complaining about the external problems we face and take a good look at ourselves. The fact is that if we want to be considered the best in our industries, and if we want to continue to earn wages and benefits that we feel our skills deserve, then, by God, we'd better be the best we can be. We cannot expect high rewards if we are not willing to live up to high standards.

The problem takes several forms. It may be expressed in the attitude our members have about their jobs, thinking that they can slack off at will or have high absenteeism rates because they have a union to protect them. Or they think that showing up for work is an end in itself. Or they come to work looking like something you'd see on "America's Most Wanted," even if they have jobs that require them to interact with the public. And is there any local union official who hasn't heard constant complaints from some members who never show up at union meetings or ever volunteer to help make their local run better? I would hope that everyone here has seen the state of our union video where we address these issues in depth and if you have not maybe a minute on the web page wouldn't hurt.

There's no magic bullet to getting all our members to suddenly become model citizens or involved in their union. But -- as I said earlier -- one of the most destructive things that has happened to the North American trade union movement is the disconnect between the rank and file and the organizational structure of their union. Once members stop feeling a sense of ownership in their union -- it is hard to get it back -- hard to mobilize them for action.

So maybe our biggest challenge comes not from George W. Bush, or the Chamber of Commerce, but from ourselves. Maybe our first order of business is to try to give our members a renewed sense of commitment to their union -- the IBEW and that they are not just a member of a Union but recognize that they are IBEW members and that the IBEW exists only -- only -- because they are members.

At the same time -- we need to build a stronger commitment to excellence within our own ranks. Our vision is of a union of people of high skills, being the best they can be in their trade and earning good wages, solid benefits and a voice on the job in return. It may sound overly idealistic; it may sound like pie in the sky. But I would remind you that the ten founders of the IBEW were also idealists. They too were laughed at by those who never thought they could buck the odds and create a powerful trade union in the face of the strength of the corporate giants of the Gilded Age.

But they did -- and their job was a lot tougher. Can we in good conscience do anything less than our best? Can we refuse to dig deep to come up with the ideas and the vision and courage to create positive change?

To paraphrase the words of the great Samuel Gompers, the first president of the American federation of Labor: What does labor want? Speaking for the IB of EW -- We want more... more commitment... more dedication to our ideals -- more members -- more strength in our industries... more justice and dignity and security in our society. And we will not rest until we get it. Thank you, brothers and sisters for listening and God bless each and every one of you.