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FROM THE OFFICERS

A Hope-Filled Start



Lonnie R. Stephenson
International President

By the time you read this column President Joe Biden will have completed just over two months in office. And I'm happy to report he's following through on the promises he made to working men and women during his campaign.

Last month, we told you about some of the incredible hiring decisions he's made, including Labor Secretary Marty Walsh and Los Angeles Local 11's own Jennifer Kropke, whom he hired to make sure good union jobs are a top priority at the Department of Energy.

As I'm writing this, President Biden is preparing to sign a bill that will pump \$1.9 trillion into the nation's struggling economy, including direct payments to many Americans and a lifeline for struggling cities and states, many of which employ our IBEW sisters and brothers.

In February, I was invited to the Oval Office with some of my counterparts from other unions, and I have to tell you, I'm more hopeful than I've been about the future of our country and the labor movement than I've been in a long time.

You see, Joe Biden gets it. Like us, he came from a working-class family. He watched his father make hard choices to put food on the family's table, and he grew up knowing the value of hard work and sacrifice. He learned early on about the power of unions to lift up people who would stand no chance if they had to stand alone against corporate power and greed. And during the campaign, he promised to be "the most pro-union president you've ever seen."

As we sat there in the White House and he laid out his agenda for a long-awaited infrastructure package, I felt that promise powerfully. Because when Joe Biden says that the work of revitalizing America's roads, rails and bridges, ports and airports will be done union, he means it. When he says IBEW members will be the ones to prepare our energy grid for the next 100 years, he's not just shooting off at the mouth.

When a member of his Cabinet looks a dozen automakers in the eyes and tells them that their next-generation factories and charging networks will be built by union hands, I'm filled with hope. Because I've never seen that before. Not from Republican presidents. Not from Democratic presidents.

The jobs President Biden is talking about are the kind that can take a wireman from first-year apprentice to retirement. The manufacturing jobs he plans to create with his "Buy American" and supply chain executive orders are the sort that will provide for a middle-class life and a secure retirement.

That doesn't mean every decision will go our way, not by a long shot. But Joe Biden cares about working men and women to his core, and he believes in the power of unions just as strongly. And that's a heck of a reason to feel hopeful. ■

Pensions Prove Who Our Friends Are

Brothers and sisters, I wear a lot of hats as your International Secretary-Treasurer, but none is more important to me than my responsibility as steward of the National Electrical Benefit Fund.

Like many of you, a major lure in joining this brotherhood was the promise of a secure and dignified retirement after years of hard work. There have been a lot of other amazing benefits along the way, but that stands out as the great reward at the end of a long career.

For many of our union brothers and sisters in other trades, that promise has been in danger through no fault of their own. Entire industries have been hollowed out as the economy changed, and more workers ended up drawing on pension plans than were paying in. That put some of those plans into serious financial trouble.

I've been talking to you about the Butch Lewis Act for several years, a bill circulating in Congress that would help those plans survive and keep those retirement promises intact. Our friends on Capitol Hill kept introducing this plan, but they kept running into opposition.

You see, many on the anti-union side wanted to see those plans fail. They wanted millions of retired Americans to lose their hard-earned pensions so they could point to their failure as an argument against unions and against defined-benefit plans like many of ours.

The government insurance plan for these pensions has been underfunded for years, and Republicans wanted to tax healthy pensions like the IBEW's into insolvency to make up the shortfall.

But I'm so proud to report that President Joe Biden and Democratic majorities in both the House and the Senate included language from Butch Lewis in the American Rescue Act, the \$1.9 trillion stimulus plan that will fund everything from vaccine manufacturing to extended unemployment payments and more.

I often get asked why the IBEW gets so involved in politics, and the next time I get asked that question, I'm going to point to this pension rescue.

We get involved because the only thing standing between millions of union retirees watching their pensions go up in smoke and the anti-union crowd looking to make an example of them were House and Senate Democrats and a friend in the White House. Not a single Republican voted to save these struggling pensions or to prevent our healthy ones from getting dragged down with them.

Next time you're casting a vote, remember that. We're not liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat at the IBEW. We're for the politicians who stand with us.

After years of working to see sensible legislation like Butch Lewis signed into law, that has never been clearer. ■



Kenneth W. Cooper
International Secretary-Treasurer