

THE ACADEMY OF ELECTRICAL CONTRACTING

Paper presented by

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The NECA-IBEW Relationship
(A "Marriage" Worth Preserving)

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P A P E R

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I. OUR PAST

Webster defines marriage as a conjugal relationship. His literal interpretation of a conjugal relationship is "being united, joined together, or associated in unison."

All of those terms describe what the NECA-IBEW relationship has been . . . or should be.

However, there is an obvious gap between what "has been" and "should be" and that gap is the subject of this Paper.

NECA and the IBEW individually have long and impressive histories dating back to the turn of the century. But it wasn't until they banded together and created a number of joint and mutually beneficial programs that their collective history became illustrious rather than merely impressive.

This "marriage" was consummated when NECA President L.K. Comstock and IBEW President Charles Ford established the Council on Industrial Relations in 1920. That move brought domestic tranquility to the relationship and benefitted both parties as well as the industry they served.

1947 was a banner year for the relationship. That was the year that the National Electrical Benefit Fund, as we know it today, was instituted. NEBF assured IBEW members of dignity and financial stability when they retire, while providing signatory contractors greater flexibility and mobility of their work force.

The marriage was further strengthened in 1947 with the establishment of the National Joint Apprenticeship and Training program. The NJATC assured both parties of the "life blood" so necessary to the growth and perpetuation of both organizations; a steady flow of dues-paying members for the IBEW and highly trained, skilled craftsmen for signatory contractors to keep pace with attrition and ever changing technology.

With the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 (which outlawed the closed shop), the marriage spawned the Standard Referral System (and in some locales, a jointly administered seniority system) to facilitate a central pool of trained workers available only to signatory contractors.

There you have it: the four cornerstones of the relationship and the glue that has held the marriage together (CIR, NEBF, NJATC, Referral System).

The National Agreement of 1976 further strengthened the relationship in a number of key areas and reaffirmed previous commitments.

This "marriage" of almost seven decades produced many offspring in the form of 132 Chapters and 377 Construction Locals throughout Canada and the United States.

Sometimes the children of this marriage (just like in real life) became restless, recalcitrant or even downright unfaithful for a variety of reasons and with varying results. They began flexing their muscles in the 1970's.

II. PRESENT (1980's)

The very foundations of this marriage have been shaken (but not broken) during the past decade.

Non-union intrusion into previously considered hallowed ground (the union contractors share of the marketplace) has resulted in some incidents of infidelity and children have defected on both sides of the family.

Infidelity for the purposes of this Paper is primarily represented by local unions granting "sweetheart" provisions or no strike pledges to owners or general contractors while denying same to signatory contractors; or when a Chapter openly courts non-union members or promotes their interests.

This is not to say that project agreements granted by a local union are always bad; nor does it mean that non-signatory contractors as members in some Chapters is not an absolute necessity for the survival of a Chapter.

However, if the marriage had worked as it was intended, there may not have been a reason for a project agreement in the first place; and former or prospective Chapter members would never have become non-union contractors, thereby eliminating that problem before it became one.

There are other incidents of the "matrimonial vows" having been bent or broken by one side of the family or the other. One such instance is when a local union refuses to honor the commitment by their parent organization in the National Agreement

"to obtain and maintain sufficient apprentices so that the ratio of indentured apprentices in the program accomplishes the requirements of the Agreement." That deviation from the commitment interrupts the flow of "life blood" for signatory contractors in a given area and hits them right in the pocketbook, thereby seriously damaging the family relationship.

Another instance of renegeing on a contractual obligation is when a Chapter (or contractor) promotes double breasting, thereby damaging employment opportunities and earning power for local union members.

Infidelity and defections are threats to any close relationship. In the final analysis, it is relatively unimportant in determining the lesser of the two evils; the one that resulted in the defection or infidelity or the one that precipitated it in the first place.

Family counselors classify three of the main reasons for breakups as: (1) infidelity; (2) money problems; and (3) how to handle the children. This marriage is being plagued by all three.

III. THE FUTURE (1987 →)

If the NECA-IBEW relationship is in trouble as many on both sides believe to be the case, it is those three problem areas that must be resolved by the principals in this relationship: the IO and NECA at the very top levels.

We all know that Washington or "Big Daddy" can't solve or prevent all the problems at the local level, nor do we want it that way.

Now, more than ever, the two heads of the family must foster and maintain a climate at the National level that facilitates local solutions to local problems; because unresolved local problems soon become regional and/or national problems.

At the very least, the two parent organizations must exert their considerable influence to prevent the seeds of disaster from being sown at the local level by either party.

The IO can no longer sit idly by while an irresponsible action by a local union upsets the stability of an entire area through the use of brute force or an economic stranglehold on contractors in a given area.

History has repeatedly taught us that this kind of cancer spreads and ultimately proves fatal. NECA at the highest levels must use its influence with the IO to minimize such occurrences.

The IBEW at all levels must be made to realize that where double breasting occurs or a Chapter moves toward a non-union posture, it is generally the result of an outlandish settlement under duress, and/or a prolonged strike in the not too distant past.

Let's face it: a strike in our industry has become a mismatch. Contractors with all their marbles in the game and their inherent obligation to service their customers (or lose them) are just too vulnerable in this day and age.

With "a gun at their head", a reasonable settlement is an elusive target, and sometimes that gun goes off. Regardless of whether the result is "suicide" or "homicide", the corpse is just as dead.

All too often, when a local union goes on strike, many of their members are either working under "no strike" project agreements, or for governmental entities, or in adjacent areas - hence the reference to a "mismatch."

The industry can no longer afford any more of these mismatches. The stakes are just too high and the residual effects are too devastating to both parties, locally and nationally. In a free society, strikes cannot and should not be outlawed. But in this industry foolish, devastating work stoppages must be minimized.

The two principals in this marriage should not seek constitutional loopholes, or hang their hats on outmoded traditions, nor let parochial concerns stand in their way when the survival of the marriage and the salvation of the family are at stake. That happens to be a dubious "luxury" we can no longer afford.

Fortunately there are some bright spots on the horizon. All is not doom and gloom as the naysayers would have you believe.

Farsighted NECA leaders of the past opened lines of communication to the future for their successors and plowed considerable new ground previously deemed untouchable. Enlightened new leadership in the IBEW seems to hold out hope for the kind of reconciliation so necessary for the survival of the organized industry. The new leaders on both sides not only have the opportunity but the obligation to build on the past, improve the present and enhance the future.

They will have to take bold steps, exercise firm leadership, institute constructive actions and possess the resolve to do what is necessary to preserve this marriage and save the family.

They must have the support of their respective executive committees for the overall good of the industry.

Someone once said "the past is prologue." That being the case, if our individual pasts were impressive, then our collective future can be electrifying if we don't short circuit the opportunity to make it that. The time is now!

Is this marriage worth preserving? You bet it is!

Can it be saved? You're darned right it can!