

Big Kansas City Organizing Win—First at GE in 10 Years

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After three failed organizing campaigns in almost four years in Kansas City, Mo., General Electric Transportation's managers might have thought they had unions licked. That all changed on Jan. 27 when workers voted 44 to 41 for representation by Kansas City Local 1464. It is the first organizing victory at GE in 10 years.

GE tapped internal and outside union busting experts to defeat the drive at the four year-old plant. But workers said the company's own broken promises weighed more than the mud they threw. Delayed wage increases and higher co-pays for prescriptions led the list.

But, after seeing a co-worker die in 2010 after having his legs crushed on the job, the plant workers, who rebuild railroad traction motors, were just as sick of having complaints over working conditions ignored and frustrated with rampant favoritism in the plant.

Jeff Crosby is a longtime IUE-CWA leader at a large GE plant in Lynn, Mass. and an AFL-CIO blogger. Now retired, but still organizing GE plants, Crosby says:

Congratulations to IBEW. This is a huge win. The last workplace organized at GE was 10 years ago—a small service shop in Florida. And the last win at a big plant was 25 to 30 years ago.>

Lead Organizer Mike Knox says workers at the plant called organizers back soon after a prior IBEW campaign lost by 11 votes in December 2010. Based upon company statements during the prior campaign, workers had been led to expect a significant wage increase if the union lost. But the wage increase they received was not at the level they expected.

Jim Wasserman, a heavy frame repairman, has worked at GE Transportation for a year and a half. A volunteer organizing committee member, Wasserman says his committee dealt upfront questions such as whether GE would pull out of Kansas City in retaliation for a win by the union.

Workers arrived at a consensus that the company had made a significant investment in the still new facility and would incur significant costs to shut it down. "We hit home," says Wasserman, with the message that if GE ever did decide to leave, the workers would be left with nothing unless they had a labor agreement with protections like severance pay and other benefits. Says Wasserman:

GE Transportation's motors are at work on thousands of rail cars across the country. This plant is profitable and productive, but it needs a fresh start. I think this is a new day for us if we stay positive and make our relationship work better.

As union busters tried to marginalize IBEW organizers and spread rumors, the VOC held meetings, even after second shift at midnight to dispense accurate information. Says Knox:

No one was allowed to leave without having their questions answered. That's what differentiated us from GE. When they held meetings, workers left feeling that their questions had gone unanswered.

Prior to IBEW filing for a new election, the company announced a new bonus plan for 2011 to reward workers for high productivity and good attendance. But last December, after the union filing, GE said they couldn't grant any bonuses until a representation election was held because they could be accused of an NLRB unfair labor practice. The fuse was lit.

During prior campaigns by the IBEW, the Teamsters and the UAW, GE Transportation tried to separate the senior workers on the daylight shift from their mostly junior co-workers on evening shift. This time they deepened that tactic by scheduling less overtime and reducing Saturday "supershifts" to keep workers from each shift apart. Wasserman, a second shift worker, says the VOC overcame GE's tactics. He says:

I attended meetings with the daylight crew and some VOC members on daylight shift attended meetings with us. We came to the same conclusion: that GE hadn't convinced us about what they were going to do to answer our problems.

IBEW organizers invited members of railroad locals who work with GE motors to VOC meetings. Says Knox:

It was a big help knowing they were there to speak the language of the trade and talk about the market for GE Transportation's product, the rebuilt motors that members of our new bargaining unit send back to the field, ready to run.

Knox credits the win at GE to powerful teamwork among the plant's workers and a merger of local union and International resources. Darrell McCubbins, business manager of Local 1464 and his staff worked closely with Eleventh District International Vice President Curtis Henke and his staff to overcome misinformation and other obstacles planted by GE's union busters.

As Local 1464 prepares for first contract negotiations, workers at nonunion GE plants are showing renewed interest in organizing. Crosby, the IUE-CWA organizer, says:

We are seeing more activity on the organizing front at GE plants than we have seen in years.