

# *IBEW benefits from work across the region*

*Local 873 members working in Lafayette, South Bend, Fort Wayne as Kokomo begins to pick up steam*

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GROUNDING — Nick Bunch (left) and Kent Glassburn (right) from J&J electric work on a grounding grid at Kokomo Auto World.

Building trade unions rely heavily on new construction projects to keep their members busy. Even in good times, economically, there isn't always enough work to go around.

That is the case with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 873 today.

According to business agent Chuck Griffin, things have been rough in certain parts of the union's six-county coverage area.

"The best thing for us is Kokomo tends to stay strong as a union town," said Griffin. "In other areas, like Marion, it's pretty much gone as far as trying to get work. There are a few places there. General Motors is OK, and we have Marion General Hospital again.

"We had done work there for years, but they got new leadership that decided to use non-union labor. The contractor went in there and messed up a lot of the work and cost the hospital a lot of money. J&J Electric was successful in getting back in there and getting the work again. Now they are in the process of doing some major projects, using our contractors. That was a big win for us."

#### Legal trouble

Changes in the state law haven't helped matters. They haven't particularly hurt, either, but Griffin believes it is only matter of time before anti-union legislation at the state level begins to put a pinch on his local.

"We're trying to just calm the storm right now," said Griffin. "With everything that's going on with Right to Work and doing away with the common construction wage, it hasn't affected us quite yet. It will probably take a year or two, but we will see a big effect on labor when it becomes more prevalent.

"Our next battle is going to be what they cleverly call paycheck protection. It's already being introduced, but I don't know if they'll try to pass it during the short session. They're going after the teachers, firemen, police, and other public sector unions first.

“Paycheck protection will make it illegal to withhold union dues from your paycheck. If they get that passed, it will make it that much harder for a union to exist because you have to rely on your members to come in and make those payments. They’re going to tell businesses what they can or can’t do.”

Griffin cautioned that paycheck protection will do far more than just harm unions. If it is introduced and passed, the charities in Indiana’s local communities will suffer as well.

“The first thing people will say is we need paycheck protection, but 90 percent of the people won’t understand what it means,” said Griffin. “You wouldn’t be able to withhold money for charities like United Way and organizations that help people. We need these organizations to exist.

“There are tons of very good organizations out there that rely on people being able to have donations withheld from the paycheck. It’s convenient for people who want to support them. But it can be hard to remember to write the check every month. It will hurt unions, but it will hurt a lot of service organizations, too.”

Work is good

Griffin said that work in Kokomo has been decent, but Local 873 still has as many as 35 journeymen looking to other areas in the state for work. He is thankful that nearby communities have plenty of work for his members.

“There is still some tornado repair work to be done,” said Griffin. “We just finished up the union hall on Hoffer Street for UAW Local 685, and we’re just starting the Salin Bank project on South Washington in front of Kroger. We were able to get that work.

“Community Howard is doing a couple of projects right now, and they have been very good to us for many years. We have work at Chrysler, and we have some school upgrade projects. We’re picking up some commercial work, like the Markland Mall.

“Lafayette has tons of work right now with an addition to Subaru, a soybean processing plant, and Purdue University. We also have a few members working in northern Indiana in Laporte and South Bend. They will have tons of work over the next few years because Notre Dame has about \$1 billion in work planned. And they are building a new hospital in South Bend. We’ll also have some members working in Fort Wayne because General Motors is adding on 1.1 million square feet, and there is a hospital job up there as well.”

Because the work has increased in Kokomo, the union has been able to resume normal operation of its apprenticeship program. This wasn’t the case in the aftermath of the recession.

“Four or five years ago when the economy wasn’t as good, we didn’t even take on new classes,” said Griffin. “And for awhile we took on new classes, but they weren’t allowed to work for the first year because we didn’t have anything for them. It’s good for us to maintain about 10 new students a year, which allows us to retain instructors and keep up with attrition through retirement.”

Why union?

For those looking to get into the electrician field, Griffin is certain that joining the union is the best option available. The value of a superior education and safety training make the difference between learning on the job outside of a formal training program. And there are other benefits when it comes to job security, as long as the electrician is willing to travel.

“When you go through a union trade, once you become a journeyman, you can work anywhere in the United States,” said Griffin. “Your journeyman’s card allows you to sign the book system at any local and go to work instead of sending out applications and hoping that you are picked. There is a lot of job security.”

“Plus, you get to work and be paid while you’re going to school and going through the apprenticeship program. You only have to pay for your books through the program. You don’t have to pay tuition, and you end up with a five-year associate’s degree from Ivy Tech when you finish.”

For contractors, choosing a union workforce also comes with advantages, Griffin explained.

“You can get any number of workers you need at a moment’s notice,” said Griffin. “And you know they are all highly trained professionals with the same training and knowledge of the job. Having a skilled workforce helps drive your costs down and helps compete with other contractors.”

## Politics

One thing that Local 873 makes sure to do each year is stay involved in politics at the local and state levels. It is the leadership at those levels that has the greatest impact on local economies and the potential work for all people; not just the union. As such, the union has chosen to make endorsements this year and next.

“We’re endorsing Greg Goodnight for mayor of Kokomo, and we’re endorsing John Gregg for governor and Glenda Ritz for state superintendent,” said Griffin. “We try to get involved as much as we can. We cover six counties, and there are people in each county we try to endorse. We endorse city council members as well. They just need to come talk to us and visit or membership.”

“It’s important for us to stay politically involved. The help these officials can give us and people in the community is needed. We believe it’s about local jobs for local people for a strong local economy. That’s what you have to protect by ensuring local workers and contractors stay busy. We want leaders who don’t want to attack unions and working people. We try to protect everyone, not just the union.”

Griffin knows that not everyone will agree with the union's choices politically, but he is more concerned that people exercise their right to vote.

"Please get out and vote," said Griffin. "We have a history of terrible turnouts. People think that because it isn't a Presidential election, it doesn't matter. That couldn't be further from the truth. All of the local elections are way more important, because that's what affects the local economy. We need everyone to get out and vote."