



A **SHORTAGE** OF SKILLED WORKERS

Will Utilities Be Prepared to Face Uncertain Future?

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It's a frigid January night in upstate New York. The temperature is a biting 23 degrees, and it feels even colder, thanks to a ferocious wind whipping across a massive snow bank—the remnants of a fierce winter storm that knocked out power to thousands of homes.

On a street lit only by the flashing orange lights of utility trucks, Bob Elliott, his white hair covered by a hardhat, emerges wearing a thick jacket emblazoned with the logo of Central Hudson Gas and Electric. After almost 40 winters on the job, Elliott is getting ready to once again scale the slick, icy rungs of a three-story power pole. His mission, in the wake of another wicked Northeast storm, is to get the electricity flowing to customers stuck in the dark and cold.

"It's a rewarding job," Elliott, 63, said in an interview recounting his four decades of work as an IBEW journeyman. "After a big storm, you can see how you've helped. I think I'll miss that the most."

Elliott, a working foreman and member of Poughkeepsie, N.Y., Local 320, made his final winter climb last year. He is retired now and plans to move to Colorado to spend time with his son and three grandchildren. "It's been a great job, and soon it'll be a whole new life," he said.

And Bob Elliott is far from alone. The utility industry is facing a massive wave of retirements over the next five years—more than at any other time in its 127-year history. At least a third of the nation's electrical utility workers—a total of about 160,000 employees—are eligible to leave their jobs by 2013. That aging work force could leave the power industry deeply unprepared for the future, according to a group of energy experts.

"A major transformation is coming," said Jim Hunter, director of the IBEW Utility Department in Washington. "We need people who can help pick up where these workers leave off, plus construct and run new systems of power."

Hunter is part of a panel—made up of corporate executives, economists, labor and political leaders—convened by the National Commission on Energy Policy to examine the future of electrical utility jobs in the U.S.

A report issued in October by the Task Force on America's Future Energy Jobs said a plan to rebuild and modernize the nation's electric power infrastructure is in "serious jeopardy" due to a lack of qualified workers in the pipeline. The report asked troubling questions about the future of the utility industry, including: who will fill the tens of thousands of open utility jobs, will the applicants be qualified enough to keep the power running, and will they have the expertise to build an advanced, low-carbon electrical grid that can power the nation into the future?

The issues facing the industry come into focus at places like Pepco, the power utility serving Maryland and Washington, D.C.

Forty to 50 percent of the company's union work force will be eligible to retire in the next few years, said John Holt, president and business manager of Largo, Md., Local 1900. He believes Pepco's hiring has not kept pace.

During testimony before the D.C. Public Service Commission two years



More than a third of U.S. utility workers are scheduled to retire within the next five years.

ago, Holt urged the company to "aggressively hire new workers" to meet the demand. At the time, the company made about 30 new hires. "They didn't take it as seriously as I hoped they would," Holt said.

During contract negotiations in June, Pepco agreed to hire a minimum of 120 craft workers over the next three years. Holt said 400 workers are eligible to retire during that same time.

Advanced power systems—like nuclear, renewable energy, advanced coal with carbon capture and smart grid—will mean a need for even more energy workers. As many as 300,000 new jobs could be created by 2030. Many of them will require special, advanced skills.

The IBEW is helping meet this need with its National Utility Training Trust—a joint effort between the union and four major utilities to establish regional training facilities that will prepare the next generation of workers. (See "Regional Training Centers: Solutions to Utility Skill Shortage," IBEW Journal, Winter 2008.)

"There's a huge opportunity for us," Hunter said. "This is a chance to improve the country's economy and the environment while also creating new high-skilled, high-paying jobs for our members. But certain things have to happen first."

The task force said the nation's educational infrastructure needs improvement, including measures to deal with low graduation rates, a lack of technical skills and a shortage of teachers trained in industry-specific subjects.

The panel wants the government to create new regional training centers, to keep better track of the energy sector work force and to create a series of "best practices" for the energy industry, outlining standards for future energy workers. It also recommends government-funded education and a more intensive focus on science and math for students seeking a career in the energy sector.

The 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is already providing an infusion of cash to carry out the recommendations. Of the \$45 billion in new energy spending, the act sets aside about \$500 million for job training programs.

If qualified applicants are not available to fill the open jobs in the years to come, both union workers and the general public could pay the price, according to the group's report. IBEW and other union members might face stiffer competition from non-union contractors hired to fill open slots. The public could see more power outages, more downtime and longer waits for repairs after major storms.

Back in upstate New York, retiring lineman Bob Elliott said, in spite of the dire predictions, he believes in a bright future for the power industry and has confidence in the generation of power workers to come.

"I see this new group of young people coming in. They're good at their jobs and they're hard workers," he said. "I feel good leaving things in their hands."

But for the experts, the question remains: how many hands will be left to power America into the future?

Download the full task force report [here](#).