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The newest buildings in Milwaukee are being done union — because their owner now considers himself a union developer! The story is on [electricTV.net!](http://electricTV.net)



Union-Busting ‘Onslaught’ Snares Organizing Campaign

Downers Grove, Ill.—Most weekday mornings and weekends, “Stan” is in his company truck before sunrise prepping for a demanding day of work for United States Infrastructure Corp. Over the next 12 to 14 hours, he will expertly locate and mark where underground utilities for companies like AT&T, ComEd and Comcast are buried throughout the northeastern corner of Illinois.

It’s tricky work that requires technical know-how and keen attention to detail. After he and other so-called “locators” leave a site, digging crews will arrive and use their paint markings and orange flags as guides before breaking ground and making tweaks to their companies’ electrical, cable or gas infrastructure—which can be dangerous tasks.

“I take great pride in my work,” said Stan, who declined to give his real name fearing management retaliation. “I know I have to do my best so no one gets hurt while digging. Lives are at stake.”

But Stan—like hundreds of his co-workers across Illinois and beyond—hasn’t seen a raise in years. As management has tightened its belt since the recession, Stan’s merit pay has evaporated while he has seen his and his fellow workers’ health insurance costs more than double. Scheduling has become erratic, making Stan’s family time scarce.

“We have to work long hours just to survive,” he said. “A 40-hour pay period is not enough to pay the bills and feed our families. I feel like USIC is saving a lot of money off the backs of their workers. Every time we turn around, they are taking something away.”

Searching for Support

Last year, Stan and his co-workers reached out to the IBEW for help. From the get-go, Stan says, the group’s organizing campaign—led by Downers Grove Local 21—made an impression.

“When my co-workers first found out that we were organizing, they got on board quickly and easily,” he said. “Very few locators were actually happy with our working conditions.”

Once IBEW organizers started sending letters and information to the workers, Stan saw the opportunity for a teachable moment for his children—a way to explain why he was potentially risking his job in the hopes of winning better pay for his family. He put every piece of literature that came from the organizers in separate frames and hung them on his living room wall.

“My kids first asked me, ‘What is a union?’” he said. “I told them a union is an organized group of workers who use



USIC workers face extreme company opposition to organizing.

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their strength to have a voice in their workplace. They were proud of me for standing up for what’s right. I framed the letters so I could educate my kids on the importance of forming a union so when they grow up they can better understand what I was trying to accomplish.”

Despite skilled tactics from IBEW organizers in his state and a rousing initial push from workers at the shop, Stan said that management’s intimidation and scare tactics were too strong. His co-workers narrowly voted against IBEW representation last December.

“USIC hired a union-busting lawyer and spread so much misinformation and lies about becoming union, the IBEW and Local 21, that workers were confused and didn’t know what to believe,” he said. “Once [USIC] made it clear that they did not want us to organize, they scared workers into believing that they would be fired if caught even talking about the union.”

Which means for Stan, there’s a bare space on that living room wall where another framed letter—one congratulating him on his win—could have hung. And that’s potentially another year on the job with no raise, higher medical costs and long, solitary hours.

Antiunion Assault

Stan isn’t alone. IBEW organizers say they have heard similar stories for more than a year from USIC workers in Florida, Iowa and Illinois. Early last year, organizers launched a national campaign to bring union wages and benefits to the employees. Six elections have been held so far.

“The good thing was that the locators already had some experience with IBEW members,” said organizer Brian Heins. “They often work very closely with utility members who are in the union and have contracts. When you know someone by name and work side by side with them, you start to learn from them about why forming a union can greatly improve your life and workplace.”

But while interest has been high, management pushback has been swift and crippling to the campaigns.

Last December, the union lost a handful of elections—a pattern that Heins described as the result of an “antiunion onslaught.”

“USIC has refined tactics,” Heins said. “They were big on making promises. And they pulled the good-cop, bad-cop routine to try to confuse and break trust among the workers.”

Heins also said the company offered employees raises if they voted against organizing, and sowed doubt by telling workers that a “yes” vote could mean no raise at all.

Organizer Lynn Arwood said that further points of pressure—holding captive audience meetings, awarding bonuses to outspoken workers in exchange for their silence and the questionable firings of two strong supporters—produced a “chilling effect” on the employees.

“They divided the workers and manipulated them,” Arwood said. “The tipping point was when the majority of supporters became very scared they

becomes difficult,” Heins said. “This is where the Web site was helpful—for a national campaign, we have to tie the workers together so that they know they’re not alone. They need to feel some form of cohesion. A worker in Florida is in the same fight as someone in Joliet (Ill.)”

“The company this time has fired on all barrels to stop the workers from having a voice—but they can’t do that again,” he said. “We’re already hearing that some of the promises the company made are being taken back. And when the company doesn’t follow through on their word, the workers will know who was telling them the truth. This isn’t over. Sometimes there is a light at the end of the tunnel, even with a loss.”

For workers like Stan, the “no” vote signaled a grim reality in the way many companies nationwide treat the work force that helps make them successful.

“We all know that the majority of locators really do want to have a union at USIC,” he said. “But with all of their

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— Lynn Arwood, Organizer

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Taking Stock

Heins said one of the campaign’s key features—and one that will be a part of future efforts—was a Web site developed in conjunction with USIC workers and IBEW activists to foster community among employees across great distances. A welcome message on the site—www.USICYes.com—“encourage[s] all USIC workers to participate, voice concerns and become involved in the campaign to gain a voice at work.”

Since employees get assignments from home and then spend much of the day in the field, “communication

union-busting tactics, the company intimidated or tricked people into believing that they were better off to continue being abused by management. It just doesn’t seem that we can really exercise our legal rights without the company putting on a campaign of fear and intimidation.”

Yet he remains optimistic.

“I would like to see a change in the way we are treated so this can be a career that I can enjoy a modest retirement from,” he said.

Regardless of the outcome now, and for whatever follows, Arwood says that her fellow IBEW organizers are eager to help workers like Stan get the treatment they deserve.

“I would have loved for him to have been able to put his ‘win’ letter in a frame,” Arwood said. “I hope someday soon, he can.” ■