



IBEW 11 Business Manager Marvin Kropke with new members from Jacobs Industrial Services a subsidiary of the \$11 Billion dollar construction and engineering firm Jacobs.

# Progress at the Refineries

## Safety, Good Jobs a Boon for Union Refinery Workers after Decades-Long Fight

By Jacob Bourne

The work of IBEW 11 has helped to make significant safety changes while guaranteeing good-paying jobs in the state's refinery industry.

Senate Bill 54, a refinery safety law sponsored by the State Building and Construction Trades Council in 2013, passed in November 2016, resulting in sweeping changes for how work is addressed in the state's refineries. The legislation mandates that outside contractors used in onsite maintenance and construction work meet skill and training requirements. According to Dick Reed, IBEW Local 11 president, refineries had relied heavily on union labor up until the early 1990s. However, in subsequent decades the industry became largely marked by companies hiring non-union workers from outside of coastal Southern California.

"After 2002 until 2008 the refineries were doing 80 percent of hiring non-locally mostly from Southern states like Louisiana or workers with H-1B visas," Reed said. "We made a case to the legislature that the companies were not hiring local people, which is tied to safety because when you bring in people from all over the world, you don't know what training they've

had. They had no apprenticeship program and couldn't show continuity in training. They use lots of fuels and chemicals that could affect the public, so training is needed."

A 2012 explosion at the Chevron refinery in Richmond expelled toxic smoke into the air impacting the health of nearby city residents. During that time environmental groups were reaching out to the public about pollution issues, and capital improvement projects were being created to bring the refineries up to a higher safety standard. Labor made the case to the environmental groups that without proper worker training, the high risk of blow-ups and leaks would climb, despite capital improvements. Since the passage of SB 54, the robust training capacity and high quality standards of IBEW Local 11 and other unions have been transforming the industry.

"For years we've had a small presence," explained Kevin Norton, assistant business manager, Local 11. "We had a few legacy companies but very low market share in the refineries. There were a variety of different efforts to try to turn it around. What helped

change the industry was the refinery safety law passed by the State Senate. It requires graduates of state approved apprenticeship programs and the California State Certification for Electricians. It's not a union-only requirement but our competition didn't require these things of workers. So nearly all of the refinery contractors have signed with IBEW and other trades because we have done the hard work of training and getting our certifications."

Norton described work in the refineries as providing consistent, stable work from year to year for members. There are a number of classes at the ETI for this work including Industrial Skills Orientation, 20 hour RSO, NFPE 70E, Pipe Bending, Motor Controls and Instrumentation classes are ongoing. The two remaining refineries that are not operating under a PLA are currently in negotiations with the Building Trades.

"It's hard to have an impact on the electrical industry in Los Angeles because the market is so big," Norton said. "But in this effort, several hundred IBEW 11 members are now working in refineries that had been operating with a nonunion workforce for decades. We have also organized the best workers from that workforce and they are now part of our great union. This effort is a game changer and our members will work and provide for their families for years because of it."



The Chevron El Segundo refinery.

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