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Local 103 label fosters equity for members and contractors - by Kenell Broomstein

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IBEW Local 103

The union building trades, specifically IBEW Local 103, have long been a path to the middle class for U.S. workers, including for myself and my family. After I graduated from Lynn Vocational Technical Institute's electrical shop, I was able to achieve a sustainable career and livelihood through Local 103 as an apprentice, and then as a licensed journeyman, long before the pandemic hit.

I am well aware that many labor unions across the country, like most other institutions, have a history that does not reflect our current ideals with regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion. That is not breaking news, despite the efforts of some to rewind the clock and act like labor unions were the only groups to struggle with these issues.

The truth is that at IBEW Local 103 and many other unions, there has been a lot of change. We have put diversity, equity, and inclusion front and center in our organizing, our political action, and our recruitment efforts.

Each day, IBEW Local 103 is actively engaging with more women, people of color, veterans, and City of Boston residents than ever before, encouraging them to explore their options as highly-trained electrical workers in our union. We run robust recruitment campaigns across traditional and digital advertising, specifically engineered to invite in these folks who, due to stereotypes and prejudices ingrained into our society from past generations, might not otherwise consider the building trades as a possible career option.

Prior to COVID-19, our organizers were engaging local minority residents on the ground, in person on a daily basis, reaching out to workers both in the areas surrounding Local 103 job sites, and to workers at second-rate, nonunion shops, whose lives change once they begin receiving the union wages and benefits they deserve.

We are also proud to partner with the Building Pathways program, which introduces Boston residents, largely women, people of color and single parents, to life-changing opportunities within the union Building Trades.

As a direct result of our active outreach, IBEW Local 103 is proud that each of our new apprenticeship classes have steadily become more diverse over the past several years. In 2017, we welcomed the most diverse apprenticeship class in the history of any major construction trade union in Boston, with our highest numbers ever of minority applicants (452), and women applicants (85, majority women of color). In some cases, these were increases of 300% or more, and we have made even more improvements since then.

I made history when I was appointed to the leadership team here at IBEW Local 103, as the first woman and person of color to serve as a Business Agent. We have improved our diversity and inclusion across the board -- from first year apprentices to the Business Manager's office. That's why when certain anti-union groups, or even those who claim to be union allies, point relentlessly to the past and ignore our strides forward, it is an insult to those of us working so hard to make a difference.

As an IBEW Local 103 Business Agent and single mom, I see firsthand why more and more minority workers are taking advantage of opportunities in the union building trades:

We prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion by investing in active outreach, in all recruitment and business development, to women, people of color and MBE throughout eastern Massachusetts. We have set new diversity records each year and continue to make strides.

All of our members receive equal pay and benefits per a legally-binding union contract. Since equity is legally guaranteed in our contracts, across both the electrical and telecom industries and beyond, it isn't just an empty promise. This is an attractive proposal to all workers, and we are doing more each day to promote the opportunity to women and communities of color.

Our apprentices earn sustainable wages while they learn a trade at our industry-leading training center in Boston.

Our programs enable people of all backgrounds to build a rewarding, family-sustaining career without needing to go into debt. Instead, they can build savings. It is a unique, oftentimes life changing career path that is especially beneficial for people who otherwise would not be able to pursue education goals without an income.

IBEW Local 103's intentional outreach has also allowed us to create meaningful partnerships with various minority-owned businesses (MBE), like women-owned electrical contractor, Coughlin Electric. Outkast Electrical Contractors, a prominent, Black-owned business based in Dorchester, has doubled in size since we began our partnership just last year.

IBEW Local 103 supports our signatory contractors in many ways beyond supplying them the best workforce in the electrical construction industry. We are a partner in their very own business development, allowing the companies to thrive, and helping to advance our common mission of creating a stronger, more equitable construction industry.

So yes, like other unions, IBEW Local 103 looked very different in the past than it does today. I am proud to be the first Black woman to represent a Greater Boston construction union and because of efforts like ours, I won't be the last. IBEW Local 103 Business Manager/Financial Secretary Lou Antonellis has put diversity, equity, and inclusion at the forefront of our day-to-day work, and fully committed to building a union that better reflects the communities in which we work. The blind assumption that the unions of today are just like the unions of yesterday is an injustice to all those who could advance from these benefits.

IBEW Local 103 and other building trade unions are working every day to create a truly strong, equitable middle class. To say we are not doing our part is out of touch with the current reality, and serves only the non-union industry, in which worker exploitation runs rampant, particularly for minority workers.

I want my community to know that IBEW Local 103's doors are wide open, and all are welcome. Don't let those spreading misinformation online tell you otherwise.

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