

On the Front Lines in New York's Energy Transition: A Conversation with Electrician Union Leader Chris Erikson

by Gregory DeFreitas

The historic efforts now underway to fight climate change through a shift to renewable energy sources requires a workforce with new and demanding skill sets. On Nov. 7th, New York Governor Kathy Hochul launched the largest new wind/solar/hydroelectric investment package of any state. She chose to do so at the Electrical Industry Training Center of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), Local 3 in Queens. Standing by the governor's side at her tour of the training center was Christopher Erikson, leader of Local 3 since 2006.

No union has thrown itself into the challenges of this transition more intensely of late than IBEW. Founded in 1891, the union at first battled for vital safety and training protections in the highly dangerous new occupations of electricians. It expanded over time to represent electrical workers in construction, utilities, manufacturing, government, railroads, telecommunications and broadcasting. Local 3 has long punched above its weight politically since at least the early years of Harry Van Arsdale, Jr.'s legendary leadership.¹

When he stepped down in 1968, he was succeeded by his son, Thomas, who remained Business Manager (the union's historical title for its executive director) until 2006. He was then succeeded by current leader Christopher Erikson. A Queens native, he first joined the union as an apprentice at age 20 in 1975. In the course of his apprenticeship, he completed a bachelor's degree in Labor/Management Relations at the Harry Van Arsdale Jr. Center for Labor Studies. This interview took place in early November.

Q: You were with Governor Hochul a few days ago when she announced New York's massive new investments in renewable energy. What do you see as most promising about that from the view of organized labor?

A. Well, she's recently had a couple of bumps in the road on the way here. The first was when the PSC [NY State Public Service Commission] rejected the application for billions of extra funding by some offshore wind developers. Then a couple weeks ago the governor vetoed a bill for Equinor to put a wind farm cable through Long Beach without enough community input.

But the fact that she remains so committed with these new project solicitations is important. It's indication that she's all in. We really appreciate that. I'm a climate warrior, first and foremost. Yes, I represent workers in an industry that will do a lot of this work on the infrastructure side and the transitioning of buildings in New York City under Local Law 97. Owners now have a legal mandate to get that energy work done, and I hope many will hire workers from Local 3. So we're anxious about that.

On the infrastructure side – the Biden administration is certainly all in. He's a proponent of prevailing wage and union jobs. That's exciting for us, no question.

We have a very mature apprenticeship program in Local 3 – over 1,000 apprentices at any one time in their various steps. They're preparing to reach journeyman electrician status over a 5 and one-half year commitment. The industry committed to a \$60 million hands-on training center. The state's Department of Labor once funded training, but that ended long ago. So the cost of their training is now on the industry; the employers that employ them and participate in agreements with Local 3 as sponsors. So, we pay for all that.

Certainly I'm proud of Local 3's record of diversity in our apprentice program. We are committed, along with other building trades, that 40% of entrants to our apprentice training come through direct-entry programs that help people of color and women. Non-traditional Employment for Women, Helmets to Hardhats, Construction Skills, NYCHA – those are programs from which some 40% of our apprentice program entrants come. We're pretty excited about that and have been for a long time.

And again, moving forward, as more careers develop in offshore wind and renewable energy, people are going to want those jobs. We have a lot of relationships with high schools and colleges who are competing for grant money to train people in those jobs. Not all of them will be Local 3 jobs -- we understand that. There are all sorts of work opportunities in renewable energy and the manufacturing jobs in the supply chain of components for renewable energy, which is just as important in NY State. Those



Christopher Erikson and Governor Kathy Hochul at IBEW Electrical Industry Training Center, where she announced the largest-ever state investment in renewable energy
(Credit: Jack Miller, IBEW Local 3)

are work opportunities for marginalized people in communities that have not had much opportunity. We're committed to make it happen.

So, we're all in, and it's exciting! Of course, COVID took the wind out of our sails for a while. But this generation of offshore wind power is something that the IBEW has done for more than a hundred years. Our guys have been climbing poles and bringing power wherever it needs to go. And while a lot of people refer to offshore wind as a new industry, it's power generation -- it's what we do. We ingrain as much of the training on the new technology into the apprentice program as we can. And the governor was kind of blown away when she got to our training center, I'm not sure she anticipated what she saw there. She met our apprentices as we walked her through the facility. She saw the cables that will come in from offshore, high-voltage transmission lines, and the skill sets required to splice those cables. That's high-end stuff.

One of the challenges that we face sometimes with the cable manufacturers is that they try to argue that it's proprietary, they own it and so only their people can splice it. We've dealt with that in the past, and we'll get there. There are going to be bumps, because this is a tremendous endeavor in New York State. But I'm encouraged and we're committed to try to make it happen.

Q: You mentioned that the training program is a joint employer-union undertaking. Was that the result of many years of collective bargaining?

CE: We negotiated with employers over the years so that they contribute to our registered Joint Apprentice Training Program (JATC). We have an Educational & Cultural Trust Fund (ECTF) that goes beyond the beyond. I don't think any other union has anything like it. The members have access to college student loans for their children, we give out 45 \$30,000 scholarships every year, we provide college reimbursements for spouses of our members. The founder of the trust fund, our former leader Harry Van Arsdale, Jr., was committed to education. In 1939, he wrote: "There are many pressing problems facing the working men and women of this country, and present indications are that they will increase. But if these problems are to be solved properly, the workers must find the solutions themselves. In order to do so, they must be able to study, analyze, discuss and put into action." He wrote that in 1939!

Q: No question Van Arsdale was way ahead of his time.

CE: Yes. And he also stressed critical thinking skills: "The ability to choose the most effective course of action toward the desired objective." We've taught critical thinking skills to our members for more than 50 years, as a benefit of the ECTF. We owned a property for members out in Southampton for many years. We sold it in 2000 to buy another property in Cutchogue on the North Fork -- our Long

Island Educational Center – where our members can spend the weekend with their families. Members take our critical thinking class on Saturday morning. We do it like no one else, and we're very proud of our commitment to education. We've found it useful to show a documentary "The Commanding Heights," a 12-part WNEW series, as part of the critical thinking course. Our members have to understand different economic schools of thought.

In addition to all sorts of skills classes completed by journeyman, as technology changes we have to stay productive for our employers. Our members understand that if a contractor goes out of business, he's not going to be there to hire for the next job. So it's all intertwined: productivity, skills, safety. Everything that a well-compensated electrician brings to the table has value.

We have challenges: open-shop contractors in New York have made inroads into the construction industry. That's caused us to react to that, and to figure out how to be competitive. It's hard to compete with an employer paying their electricians \$20 an hour – almost impossible to compete. Economic downturns cause developers to go to banks for loans, and the banks tell them: "You want a loan, you've got to lower your labor costs." The labor movement has been in a fight for a long time. Since 1980 when Ronald Reagan fired the air traffic controllers, the labor movement has been pretty much back on its heels.

When Harry passed away – and by the way I keep talking about him because he was my grandfather. I'm only the third Business Manager since 1933! Harry served from 1933 to 1968; then his son Thomas from 1968 to 2006; and then me. What he instilled in me was that the only purpose of the union was to serve the membership. And when you do that and have the support of the membership, you don't have to worry about the politics, don't have to look over your shoulder. And when you can focus on the future, there's progress. That is why we have the benefits that we have in IBEW in New York. Local 3 has been blessed.

Harry played a big role early on in fighting racial injustice. There are photos of him talking with Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders. And his son Thomas went on to fight apartheid in South Africa.

I had a chance to talk at the national Climate March a few years ago. Some in building trades unions in Washington questioned that, because they were fighting environmental groups over approval of the Keystone Pipeline. To them, that represented more jobs -- I get that. But I went to the national IBEW President and said -- "I really feel in my gut I should be there." So I went to the march and I spoke, because I felt that I owed it to my 1-year-old granddaughter to go. Because the worst thing that could happen to me would be if, one day when that granddaughter is 25 and the environment is much worse, she asks: "Why didn't Grandpa fix that when he had the chance!" When I spoke I reminded everyone about past battles for women's right to vote, racial integration, ending child labor, apartheid and the war in Vietnam. The only reason we won those

battles was that people of good conscience came together. Climate change is an economic battle: there are powerful interests at stake and jobs for people. But when people of good conscience come together, there is change. And I think so with climate change -- we're going to get there.

Q: Given Local Law 97's mandates to shift from oil and gas to electricity soon, landlords across New York City are rushing to hire electricians and HVAC workers. And lots of non-profits (most nonunion) are trying to train job applicants to fill all those new jobs. So two questions: 1st, what would you say to them about why they should hire union labor with five and one-half years of training instead of cheap nonunion people. And second, is Local 3 considering expanding your already-large apprentice program to cope with the surge in demand for such workers?

CE: First on apprenticeships, we just opened a new program and we got 3,400 applicants. Over the next few years, we'll probably bring in about 900 of them. There's no shortage of people that want to join Local 3.

As far as landlords in the energy transition, just like with developers with affordable housing, they say: we just can't afford to build with union labor, paying prevailing wages. But we think differently: we think they can, and the building trades are working as hard as they can to try to demonstrate that.

I have 1300 unemployed electricians right now. So when people say there's a shortage of electricians -- well, there's no shortage of skilled electricians. Nonunion contractors may face a shortage of half-skilled people to do the work. Some contractors are turning this work over to Local 3 contractors because they can't perform. So we have the skilled labor to meet that demand.

As far as costs go, we want to be competitive on every job. Local 3 made an agreement with DCAS (NYC Department of Citywide Administrative Services, to install solar systems on City-owned buildings) to make sure that it became part of the project labor agreement with New York City. I did that by modifying the prevailing rate on some of the work skills in order to both lower the labor costs and committed to bring in people from environmentally impacted communities that haven't had much opportunity.

Is it happening? Yes, slowly. Landlords are adapting, but they're under a lot of pressure since COVID, with its impact on office space in New York City. But, the work will get done, though not all of it will be union jobs. Where the City has money in the game, it should be. People have a real need for work force housing that's affordable. It's a race to the bottom with nonunion employers. I don't believe a \$20 an hour solar installer job is a career. I would bring these people in to work in their communities for a year, then get them the training to become full electricians. Solar work is just part of what electricians do. I don't want to lock people in to just \$20 an hour solar panel jobs. That's what we're competing against

here and upstate: guys from down South are coming up here and getting paid \$20 an hour. There will always be some employers willing to exploit cheap labor.

Q: What about safety? High rates of accidents among low-skilled workers on nonunion jobs both hurt those workers and lower productivity on the job.

CE: Safety is key. The local law established site safety training cards that every construction worker has to have. But then some bad actors figured out how to make fraudulent SST cards and sell them to untrained workers. There are a lot of them who are at risk. There's an investigation of that going on right now. I hope the penalty is harsh enough to stop it. The government can't fix it all.

We're putting in our own GWO (Global Wind Organization) training program up in Walden, NY, where we have a camp for the children of Local 3 members. Anybody who wants to work offshore has to go in for GWO training to learn how to protect yourself in the event of an accident. But it's hard to get the training, given limited open slots. As the governor just announced, one of the developers put in a commitment for a \$2.5 million if they get the solicitation, which they did. So they're giving us \$1.5 million toward the installation of that facility. And it won't just be for Local 3 members; it will be open to any tradesman or anybody who wants that certification.

So I just want us to be prepared. I want us to understand how offshore wind intends to operate. Because this is still in its infancy. They had trouble off Rhode Island with the first wind farm and efforts on Long Island have been struggling recently. As we make this transition. I want to be sure our members have the skill sets and credentials needed to make a success of this.

And, I am prepared to acknowledge the nonunion work force in New York City in a way that we have not done in a long time. They are in the construction industry, they've got skills, they're being exploited, their standards are low. Unfortunately, we have to lower ours to get the work. But then as we lower ours, what do you think happens? Their bosses lower their rates. It's a race to the bottom. So I'm going to try to engage this work force to say: We're not here to organize you or take your job. We want to help you understand that you have rights, you have the right to organize yourselves. I'm not saying they all need to join Local 3. I'd like to educate them so that they choose to organize themselves so they can raise their employer's standards and help their families

We're starting with mental health issues. The construction industry is addressing that. And I've decided to go to 50 nonunion jobs in the next few weeks and just give out information on mental health, drug and alcohol issues.

We're giving them a heads-up on SST cards. We're not going to ask them to sign Local 3 pledge cards, just give them information. Then we'll ask them: Do you know your rights? Are getting overtime pay after 40 hours work? Is your employer providing

proper PPE? It's a new approach, an alternative to just picketing nonunion jobs. That hasn't worked in a very long time. So I am committed to reaching out to this work force that feels pretty much isolated and alone. But their employers are really bringing down the labor standards of the City, so something's got to be done.

Gregory DeFreitas is a Professor of Economics and Director, Center for Study of Labor & Democracy at Hofstra University.

REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW, vol. 26, no. 1 (Fall 2023).

© 2023 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University.

NOTES:

¹ See, for example, Harry Van Arsdale Jr: *Labor's Champion*, by Gene Ruffini (NY: ME Sharpe, 2003); and *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II*, by Joshua Freeman (NY: The New Press, 2001).