



IBEW Policy Brief

January 2025

Emerging Energy Technologies and Workforce Excellence

The United States stands at the crossroads of an energy revolution. Emerging technologies such as carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS), advanced nuclear power, and modernized transmission systems are essential for energy reliability, economic prosperity, and the nation's climate goals. These three innovative technologies are not only critical for addressing the challenges of renewable energy integration but also for ensuring the longevity of key industries that provide high-quality jobs.

CCUS technology captures carbon emissions from power plants and industrial facilities, safely storing them underground or repurposing them for commercial use. This allows traditional energy sources like coal and natural gas to remain part of the energy mix while significantly reducing emissions. For communities that rely on fossil fuel-based industries, CCUS is a lifeline that preserves jobs and stabilizes local economies.

Advanced nuclear technology is also key, providing reliable, zero-carbon power around the clock. This provides a critical baseload energy unlike sources like wind and solar that are intermittent. In this way, nuclear energy ensures grid stability, supports American manufacturing, and strengthens energy security. By extending the lifespan of existing nuclear reactors and investing in next-generation designs, the United States can continue to lead in energy innovation while creating thousands of well-paying, unionized jobs.

Modernizing transmission infrastructure is another element at the core of a responsible energy transition. A powerful and efficient grid is essential for integrating renewable energy sources, ensuring reliability, and meeting growing electricity demands. Building new transmission lines not only facilitates the expansion of energy sources but also creates opportunities for skilled workers to contribute to critical infrastructure projects, driving local economic growth.

Labor standards, such as Davis–Bacon prevailing wage laws, apprenticeship utilization, and OSHA-certified safety training, are central to ensuring all these projects are completed safely, quickly, and with a commitment to pro-worker protections. Through its apprenticeship programs and safety initiatives, the IBEW equips workers with the skills to meet the demands of these transformative projects, providing employers with a reliable and highly capable workforce.

PRIORITIES

- **Enforce Davis–Bacon prevailing wage standards:** Prevailing wage laws ensure fair compensation, promote ethical competition, and create a level playing field where contractors prioritize quality, safety, and expertise.
- **Expand apprenticeship utilization requirements:** Requiring registered apprenticeships fosters workforce development, ensuring a pipeline of skilled workers who can execute complex energy projects with precision and efficiency.
- **Mandate OSHA-certified safety training:** Comprehensive safety training reduces accidents, improves morale, and increases productivity while minimizing the costs and delays associated with workplace injuries.

- **Leverage Right-of-First-Refusal (ROFR) policies:** ROFR policies offer incumbent utilities the opportunity to build transmission projects first. These policies prioritize unionized utilities for critical projects, safeguarding labor standards and ensuring reliable, efficient energy infrastructure development.
- **Tie incentives to labor-standards compliance:** Tying labor standards to federal funding maximizes the economic benefit of energy projects by promoting fair competition, skilled labor, safe worksites, and community investment.

TALKING POINTS FOR ADVOCACY

“A modern grid is essential for the energy demands of the future.”

Upgrading transmission infrastructure is urgent for energy integration and meeting growing electricity demands.

“Nuclear’s round-the-clock availability not only stabilizes the grid and other renewables like wind and solar—it also supports good union jobs.”

Investing in nuclear’s uniquely zero-carbon capacity is how the United States remains at the forefront of this critical industry.

“We do not have to choose between reducing emissions and preserving good jobs.”

Investing in carbon capture allows fossil fuel plants to contribute to an all-of-the-above energy solution while preserving much-needed long-term jobs.

“Fair wages support fair competition, especially in new industries.”

Davis–Bacon prevailing wage laws ensure workers are fairly compensated while enabling contractors to compete based on skill and efficiency. This is key to the longevity of these newer sectors.

“Strong safety standards are the cornerstone of smart business.”

Mandating OSHA training, especially in rapidly innovating sectors, is critical to protecting workers, reducing liability, and increasing productivity.

“Current energy challenges can only be met with what unions provide: experience, efficiency, and excellence.”

Through its gold standard apprenticeship program, the IBEW provides employers with a steady supply of reliable, highly skilled workers prepared for the energy transition.



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Trade Policy

Trade policy directly affects the livelihoods of IBEW members by shaping wage standards, the competitiveness of domestic industries, and the availability of high-quality jobs. For decades, trade policies prioritized keeping tariffs low. This created a race to the bottom as companies moved production to countries with weak labor, environmental, and human rights standards, knowing they would face low tariffs when goods were imported back to the United States for sale. This has led to millions of lost jobs at shuttered factories, resulting in a depressed U.S. labor market.

Additionally, China's unfair trade practices, such as state subsidies, forced labor, and dumping, have further undercut American industries like manufacturing and renewable energy. In the United States, "right-to-work" laws and anti-union tax incentives in certain states have exacerbated challenges by luring businesses away from unionized regions.

To level the playing field for workers, barriers to the U.S. market such as the imposition of tariffs in strategic industries should be combined with strong industrial policy, such as that found in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), and the CHIPS and Science Act.

PRIORITIES

- **Impose tariffs strategically, not across the board:** Tariffs should target imports made under abusive labor conditions, that ignore environmental standards, or otherwise put American workers and producers at an unfair disadvantage. Across-the-board tariffs, on the other hand, are counterproductive. They are not intended to end the unfair practices associated with many imported goods and are likely to raise consumer prices on items that will never be produced in the United States at scale.
- **Pair strategic tariffs with strong industrial policy:** To help create American manufacturing jobs and resilient supply chains, tariffs must be combined with other industrial policy tools like tax incentives, procurement preferences, and government investment.
- **Include enforceable labor standards in trade agreements:** Require trade agreements to ban forced labor, protect collective bargaining, and enforce labor standards through mechanisms like the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement's Rapid Response Mechanism, while also strengthening global labor standards that prevent races to the bottom on wages and working conditions.
- **Reauthorize and expand Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA):** Expand TAA eligibility and increase funding to support workers displaced by foreign competition.
- **Close the de minimis loophole:** End the exploitation of the \$800 de minimis import threshold, which allows goods, particularly from China, to bypass duties and inspections, by supporting the bipartisan Import Security and Fairness Act that closes the loophole.
- **Support U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) cases for critical U.S. infrastructure:** Address national security risks by supporting USTR action to rebuild U.S. shipyards and supply chains in response to China's unfair trade practices, with the IBEW joining the USTR Section 301 trade case on shipbuilding to bolster American jobs, national defense, and critical maritime assets.

TALKING POINTS FOR ADVOCACY

“When fair trade policy includes labor standards, the American workforce grows in strength and numbers.”

Trade agreements must include enforceable labor standards to level the playing field and prevent worker exploitation.

“TAA is the responsible way to address the loss of jobs to foreign competitors like China.”

Reauthorizing this law ensures more displaced workers receive the training and support they need to secure new, high-quality jobs.

“No country should be allowed to bypass rules that protect American workers making American goods.”

The de minimis loophole allows nations like China to get around important protections. The Import Security and Fairness Act protects American jobs by requiring proper tariffs and inspections on low-value imports.

“Investing in manufacturing means more than good jobs. It means returning dignity to many communities while increasing national security.”

Domestic manufacturing is a top priority because it addresses multiple economic issues on the national and local level.

“Combating China’s inhumane and unfair trade practices with stricter rules is an economic and moral necessity.”

Enforce stricter trade rules to counteract the subsidized industries, forced labor, and dumping that harm U.S. workers.



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Revitalizing U.S. Manufacturing and Union Jobs

The IBEW plays a vital role in North America’s manufacturing sector, representing workers who produce a wide array of essential goods including batteries, semiconductors, transformers, electric motors, control panels, wire and cable, and advanced energy components. These industries are critical to economic growth and provide reliable, high-quality union jobs.

For decades, policies offshoring manufacturing to low-cost markets have devastated domestic production and union jobs, contributing to a decline in the number of IBEW members in manufacturing from 400,000 in the 1980s to 30,000 today. However, recent legislation including the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL), and CHIPS and Science Act are revitalizing U.S. manufacturing. These laws aim to return production to the United States and create opportunities in electric vehicles, semiconductors, and renewable energy components.

Manufacturing is central to the IBEW’s mission to protect and expand family-supporting union jobs. Policies that incentivize domestic production while maintaining labor standards can reverse decades of decline in this sector. These efforts enable IBEW to regain market share in U.S. factories, secure stable employment for members, and support the transition to a clean energy economy.

IBEW workers are essential to producing critical components for the future, from solar panels and electric vehicle (EV) batteries, to wind turbines and advanced semiconductors. By prioritizing union labor and domestic production, federal policies ensure these investments translate into good-paying jobs for IBEW members and long-term economic stability for American communities.

PRIORITIES

- **Ensure federal investments in manufacturing include labor standards:** Pass legislation that requires federal grants, loans, and tax credits for manufacturing projects to incentivize or mandate prevailing wages, union labor, and robust worker protections. Agencies overseeing these programs should commit manufacturers to training, equity, and the use of union labor throughout supply chains.
- **Update the Walsh-Healey Act:** Modernizing this law would establish a national prevailing wage for all federal manufacturing contracts, creating a level playing field for union workers while counteracting anti-union policies like “right-to-work” laws.
- **Pass the PRO Act:** Enacting the PRO Act would protect workers’ rights to organize and bargain collectively, ensuring manufacturing jobs remain high-road opportunities.
- **Support Build America, Buy America (BABA):** Ensure all federal infrastructure projects are made with U.S.-produced iron, steel, manufactured products, and construction materials. This helps create domestic jobs and strengthens U.S. manufacturing, particularly in industries critical to the IBEW.

TALKING POINTS FOR ADVOCACY

“The fastest way to invest in manufacturing is by supporting union jobs.”

Federal manufacturing incentives should require strong labor standards that prioritize domestic production with family-sustaining union jobs.

“Updating outdated labor protections will promote equity in a growing sector.”

Modernizing the Walsh-Healey Act ensures fair wages and protections for workers on federal manufacturing contracts, promoting equity in this important sector.

“Manufacturing workers deserve policies that lead to high-road employment.”

Laws like the PRO Act ensure manufacturing workers have the right to organize and negotiate for better wages, benefits, and protections.

“Federal investments in manufacturing must prioritize union labor to truly foster opportunity.”

Government incentives should tie funding to meaningful collaboration with unions, ensuring that new manufacturing jobs are high-quality, long-term opportunities.

“Build America, Buy America is a manufacturing policy that puts workers first.”

The Build America, Buy America Act strengthens U.S. manufacturing and supports union jobs by requiring federal infrastructure projects to use domestically produced materials.

“Union labor can quickly strengthen supply chains that the growing renewable energy economy relies on.”

Support policies that drive domestic production of renewable energy components by securing union jobs in the low-carbon economy.