



IBEW Policy Brief

January 2025

Worker Rights on the Railroad

IBEW railroaders play a vital role in keeping the U.S. economy moving. Passenger rail connects communities and contributes to lower overall emissions, while nearly 40 percent of all freight in the United States travels by rail, making it a cornerstone of our economy and infrastructure. IBEW railroaders work hard to maintain electrical systems, signals, and the safety of passenger and freight transportation.

The IBEW advocates for stronger protections under the Railway Labor Act (RLA) to safeguard workers' rights to organize and collectively bargain, and opposes cost-cutting measures like precision scheduled railroading (PSR), which puts profits ahead of worker safety.

As the railroad industry progresses towards electrification, the IBEW views this transition as an opportunity for the electrical trade to create more skilled union jobs while also contributing to the reduction of harmful emissions in transportation. Supporting these efforts is essential to ensuring future generations of workers are equipped to meet the evolving needs of the freight and passenger rail industry while maintaining high standards for safety and worker welfare.

In December 2024 IBEW railroaders saw a victory with the passage of the Railroad Employee Equity and Fairness Act. Thanks to the Senate's bipartisan leadership, this legislation ended unjust benefit cuts affecting 200,000 railroad workers. The IBEW commends the Senate for prioritizing railroaders, ensuring they receive the benefits they rightfully deserve.

PRIORITIES

Pass the Veteran Benefits Enhancement Act: Ensure veterans in the railroad industry receive fair treatment and benefits, including protection of their military retirement pay.

Pass the Railway Safety Act: Address industry-wide safety issues, including regular and thorough safety inspections and measures to prevent derailments and other accidents.

Advocate for paid sick leave for railroad workers: Pass legislation such as the Freight Rail Workforce Health and Safety Act, which guarantees all railroad workers receive at least seven paid sick days.

Push for electrification of the railroad network: Support policies that promote the electrification of the freight and passenger railroad network to help reduce emissions and create skilled jobs for electrical workers.

Strengthen labor standards in rail projects: Advocate for strong labor standards, including Davis-Bacon prevailing wages, project labor agreements, and worker classification protections in all federally funded rail projects.

TALKING POINTS FOR ADVOCACY

“Rail safety is a national priority.”

The Railway Safety Act addresses crucial issues that affect workers and the public, including improved safety measures like regular inspections.

“Electrification creates jobs and reduces emissions.”

Electrifying rail is a twofold solution. It boosts economic development while addressing climate change.

“Veterans deserve fair benefits.”

The Veteran Benefits Enhancement Act will protect the unemployment and sickness benefits of railroad workers who are also veterans.

“Railroad workers deserve guaranteed paid sick leave like everyone else.”

The Freight Rail Workforce Health and Safety Act ensures all railroad workers receive paid sick leave.

“High-road labor standards benefit workers and communities.”

Strong labor standards in rail projects, like prevailing wages and fair classification, protect workers and their communities by supporting a highly trained and well-paid workforce.



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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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Emerging Opportunities for IBEW Members in Transportation

The IBEW recognizes the potential of emerging transportation industries to create good-paying, union jobs while also supporting critical infrastructure. The IBEW is optimistic about these opportunities in electrification, modernization of rail systems, public transit expansion, and domestic shipbuilding. From installing electric vehicle (EV) charging networks to electrifying railroads and supporting U.S.-built ships under the Jones Act, these initiatives align with the IBEW's mission to ensure workers benefit from the modernization of the nation's infrastructure.

IBEW members are uniquely positioned to lead in building, maintaining, and upgrading the electrical systems that power transportation networks. Federal policies that support investments in these areas must include high labor standards such as Davis-Bacon prevailing wages, apprenticeship utilization, and project labor agreements (PLAs). These protections ensure fair wages and shared benefits for workers and their communities while boosting economic and national security.

The IBEW strongly advocates for the Jones Act, which supports U.S. shipbuilding and ensures national defense readiness. Weakening or repealing this law would threaten jobs and security. Similarly, policies like the Energizing American Shipbuilding Act and Short Sea Shipping Act are vital to revitalizing the maritime industry.

PRIORITIES

- **Support the Jones Act:** Pass the Jones Act which protects union jobs in shipyards and ensures U.S. ships are built and crewed by American workers.
- **Pass the Energizing American Shipbuilding Act:** Support the Energizing American Shipbuilding Act that mandates the use of U.S.-built tankers for liquified natural gas exports, revitalizing shipbuilding and strengthening national security.
- **Pass the Short Sea Shipping Act:** Support the Short Sea Shipping Act that would eliminate tax disincentives for using U.S.-built vessels, increasing maritime job opportunities.
- **Invest in electrifying rail systems:** Increase federal funding for rail electrification to create skilled jobs for IBEW members, modernize infrastructure, and reduce emissions.
- **Expand public transit investments:** Invest in subways, light rail, and commuter rail to create stable union jobs while improving the transportation infrastructure that communities rely on.
- **Install EV infrastructure:** Pass legislation supporting EV charging networks to ensure projects are completed by qualified union electricians and adhere to labor standards.

TALKING POINTS FOR ADVOCACY

“The Jones Act ensures American ships are built by union workers.”

The Jones Act is vital to national defense because it guarantees only American workers both build and crew American ships.

“The Energizing American Shipbuilding Act prioritizes national security and good jobs.”

Under this law, liquefied natural gas will always be exported on American-made tankers, a boon to the industry, workers, and national security.

“Much-needed investments in subways and commuter rail will result in the creation of good union jobs.”

Expansion of public transit has the potential to create stable union jobs while also improving transportation infrastructure.

“Electrifying rail solves many problems: reducing emissions, connecting communities, and creating good jobs.”

The rail industry has the power to transform communities with vital infrastructure, good jobs, and improved environmental integrity.

“EV charging infrastructure must be built by skilled union electricians only.”

This growing industry is a great opportunity to create high-paid, high-skill jobs.