

Apprentice Linemen Luis Murillo, left, and Mike Van Egmond working at the intersection of Richland and Hatch, where line crews have just finished adding new circuits to increase capacity for the area.



Visiting the jobsite at Richland and Hatch in Turlock are, from left, Business Manager Tom Dalzell, Line Supervisor Ron Vasconcellos, Business Representative Lynne Morel, and Lineman Rich Lane.



Working the job at Richland and Hatch are, from left: Apprentice Linemen Luis Murillo and John Rover; Linemen Bob Moore and Jan Backstrom; and Apprentice Lineman Mike Van Egmond.



Apprentice Lineman Mike Van Egmond.



Turlock lineworkers fought for two years to achieve IBEW representation. They've never looked back.

Forged in st

Story and photos by Eric Wolfe

It was break time, a warm summer day in the Central Valley. All the line hands were there, about three dozen strong. They'd been putting in a section of wire along a rural highway near Turlock. Now a few of them were pulling out sandwiches, standing next to the bucket truck angled into the customer's driveway, or drifting toward small patches of shade under the trees lining the road.

No one was happy. No reason to be happy. Wages were lagging at Turlock Irrigation District. Linemen had concerns about safety, about training. They felt ignored by the employee association that was supposed to represent them.

Everybody knew something had to change. But what?

That's when Lineman Ken Gross stepped onto the heavy duty bumper of Line Truck 92-02 and called for everyone's attention.

"There's a lot of negativity going on here, we all know it. What we have to decide is if everyone is willing to get out of this situation and make a change for the better. The majority of our trade is with the IBEW and we need to be part of it, too."

Maybe those weren't his exact words, but that's how people remember it. They also remember guys hollering out, "Hell yeah, let's do it." They remember it as the day their union was born.

'WE WALKED OUT AS A GROUP'

Some people get IBEW representation just by hiring on at a utility where the union has a contract. At Turlock, it wasn't so easy. The line crews were already legally represented by an employee association, which in turn had an arrangement to receive some services from another AFL-CIO union. The AFL-CIO prohibits its affiliates from raiding each other's members.

"I called Gary Mai and he refused to talk to me," recalls Gross. The IBEW's hands were tied until the Turlock linemen broke free of the employee association.

"We only had the month of August to sign a petition to voluntarily leave the association," recalls Rich Lane, another TID lineman anxious to move over to the IBEW.

"Everybody in the unit signed the paperwork and everyone left the association on the same day. We formed our own association, called the TID electrical workers."

Lane's tone is matter of fact, but you can feel the pride in his words as he tells the story.

"After that we created our own charter, we hired a lawyer, and we had an executive board. The two guys who were instrumental from the beginning were Ken



Troubleshooter Lineman Rich Lane relaxing for a moment after knocking some out of primaries on Road west of Turlock.

Members at Turlock Irrigation District wanted IBEW representation, and were willing to fight for it.



Casey Guinn, left, and Troy Borges work on the installation of three new feeders to the substation at Hatch and Central in Turlock. A lot of load has been added on this road recently, including a new Home Depot.



Struggle

Gross and Dennis Gonsalves,” says Lane. Gross and Gonsalves, who were pole partners, asked Lane to serve as chairman of their new group. Lane accepted. “The whole unit as a group was very cohesive. When we walked out, we walked out as a group. There were no stragglers,” says Lane. No stragglers. There’s a real-world definition of a union right there.

GETTING TRACTION



Jeff Sturm
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rlock.

Getting traction was another matter. The employees association didn’t want to let them go. “They thought we’d get tired of waiting because they were always saying no to us,” Lane recalls. Being linemen and being stubborn (which is pretty much saying the same thing), they decided to get a lawyer. They didn’t have to look very far. Bill Stavrianoudakis was the brother of Lineman Pete Stavrianoudakis. “We asked him if he knew anything about unions,” recalls Gross. “He said, ‘No, but let’s go to it.’” The guys each pledged to pitch in \$20 a month and the legal battle was engaged. Some of the spouses thought the men were just throwing away that monthly twenty-spot. But the men saw something in this



Troy Borges

lawyer they liked. “We held fast,” says Gross. For Gross the moment of truth came during a meeting between their attorney and TID. “We were sitting there with our young counsel, and TID had the big dollar attorney sitting across the table. We were reciting to him about the employee regulations and rules. Their attorney said, ‘It may read that way, but this is what it really means.’ Then our attorney said, ‘Are we going to go by your interpretation or how it reads?’” Gross says he knew right then they were in good shape for the coming fight. Gross and Lane both credit Dennis Gonsalves for the campaign’s success. “He was an inspiration and a driving force,” says Gross. “He had a lot of respect from the guys.” Unfortunately, Gonsalves died in a car accident before they won their first IBEW contract. “It became important for us to carry this on through for Dennis,” says Gross. **‘YOU’RE NOT GETTING IT’** But the employee association wasn’t ready to let the linemen go, and it was still the legal representative for the line-

men in negotiations. The new lineman union didn’t have the authority to sit at the table. Lane says the linemen asked the District to recognize their lineman union. “The District said they would act as a ‘disinterested third party’ for us to meet with the association and the other union one last time. They tried to facilitate a mending of the ways. I just told the mediator, ‘We’re wasting our time. We don’t want to come back,’” Lane recalls. “The mediator said, ‘How about more money.’ We said, ‘You’re not getting it.’ The talks collapsed. But when the next general bargaining was on the horizon, the District reversed course and consented to a representation election. The linemen began meeting with Local 1245’s Gary Mai, who has since retired from the union staff, and Dennis Seyfer, who became the linemen’s IBEW business representative. “From the very beginning we all as a group knew we wanted to join the IBEW,” recalls Lane. “The linemen we knew were all IBEW linemen. PG&E is IBEW, Merced Irrigation District, Modesto Irrigation District—there’s just an automatic connection there. We knew the IBEW was a good union.” They knew it was a union where a lineman’s issues would be taken seriously. **FORGED IN STRUGGLE** The line workers at Turlock Irrigation District won recognition for their lineman’s union in the waning days of 1999 and their unit was organized in January 2000. The first contract was negotiated later that year by Dennis Seyfer, Rick Lane and Steve Verschelden, and renegotiated three years later by Lane, Rick Brenes, and Business Rep. Lynne Morel.

Joining this team for negotiations that begin later this year will be Ken Gross and Business Manager Tom Dalzell. More than seven years have passed since the Turlock lineworkers organized their union, but the memories are still fresh. Their allegiance to the union was forged in struggle, and it’s demonstrated every month by the turnout for unit meetings—often 50% of the membership or more. Gross is glad the guys made the effort to organize. “It’s worked exactly to my expectations. It was a battle well fought and we’re just proud as heck that we ended up where we wanted to be.” He knows they can’t afford to grow complacent. Every month Gross passes out fliers a day or two before the unit meeting, encouraging people to attend. “A union is what you make of it,” he explains. “I’m active in it, I enjoy being part of it.” Last year the unit created their own banner, featuring a huge IBEW logo. They first unfurled it at the retirement party for former Business Manager Perry Zimmerman, and proudly displayed it at last month’s unit meeting attended by Business Manager Tom Dalzell. The banner lists the unit’s Business Representatives, unit officers, Safety Committee members, and members who have passed away. Including Dennis Gonsalves. Gross, now a Line Supervisor, says the District still has Line Truck 92-02, that old workhorse with the oversized bumper where he once stood and asked his fellow linemen if they wanted a union bad enough to fight for it. “I look at that truck every day,” Gross says. “It reminds me of Dennis and the good times we had.”

Rodeo!

2007
Public Power
Lineworkers'
Rodeo



Representing Turlock Irrigation District at the national rodeo were, from left, Aaron Baker, Bill Stavrianoudakis, Denver Hodges, Josh Klikna, Rick Brenes, and Mark Pickens.

RESULTS JUST IN...

Local 1245 linemen at Turlock Irrigation District continued their winning ways at last month's rodeo in Marietta, GA, which featured 59 journeyman teams and 70 apprentices from all over the United States. Turlock linemen finished second in the Arm Change Out, and were in the top 10 in the Insulator Change Out and Re-closer Changeout. Turlock's apprentice linemen received first and third in the Secondary Connection event, and Denver Hodges was 9th over-all out of the 70 apprentices.

Training to represent Turlock Irrigation District at the 2007 Public Power Lineworkers' Rodeo, held April 13-14 in Atlanta, Ga., are Rick Brenes, Mark Pickens, Aaron Baker and Bill Stavrianoudakis.

Some employers might not understand the value of lineman rodeos. But Turlock understands.

"Before the rodeos, no one knew who TID was," says Mark Pickens.

But nobody says "Turlock who?" anymore. The TID team last year took second place in national competition among public power utilities. And they won the arm change-out event two years in a row—in 2005 and 2006.

Last year, the Turlock crew's time in the arm change-out was over a minute faster than the second place finisher—another Turlock crew.

"We own that event—they're watching us now," says Pickens.

The union members credit management at Turlock Irrigation District for providing all-out support for the rodeo team.

"They give us the time, they give us the material, they give us the tools," says Pickens. "They want to see us succeed."

The management support comes, in particular, from General Manager Larry Weiss, Line Department Manager Dennis Moon, and Service Department Manager Rene Cargill.



The Turlock team practices its signature event—the cross-arm change-out.