

Union Brother Ronald T. Weakley

1915-2007



“The structure (of Local 1245) is based on the fundamental policy of control that begins and ends with the membership.”

Guys like Ronald T. Weakley don't come along every day.

Weakley's passion and ingenuity fired one of the great union organizing drives of the 20th century, a 12-year campaign of relentless and often bitter struggle to gain a voice for workers at Pacific Gas & Electric. When the union emerged triumphant, Weakley transformed himself from agitator to architect, constructing and negotiating innovative labor agreements that directed a steadily increasing flow of wealth from corporate coffers into workers' pockets.

The material legacy of Ron Weakley can be measured in the dollars gained for workers in the form of wages and benefits that eventually set the standard for the entire utility industry. But the man leaves another legacy, one that transcends these material accomplishments. Weakley believed in the power of the people to govern themselves, and structured Local 1245 to assure that the members would always have the ultimate say.

When Weakley died on Oct. 11 at the age of 92, we lost more than our union founder and leader. We lost one of the true heroes of the 20th century, an ordinary man with an extraordinary ability to inspire others to believe in themselves and what they can accomplish together. We lost our union brother.



So long, Ron, it's been good to know you.

Ronald T. Weakley's first encounter with workplace injustice came on the day of his birth.

His father, a hardrock miner and member of the militant Industrial Workers of the World, had been blackballed for union activism. The only way Earl Lloyd McDoolin could work was under a phony name. When baby Ron came into the world on Jan. 24, 1915, the name entered on his birth certificate was the one his father had made up in order to hold a job: Robinson.

A stepfather, William Weakley, later replaced McDoolin as the center of Ron's family life, but unionism remained central to Weakley's childhood experience. William Weakley, initiated into the IBEW in 1905, worked as a lineman as well as a construction electrician.

"He was very active in the union, particularly in strikes," Weakley once recalled. "The St. Louis car strike was a big one in which he participated."

When his stepfather went broke during the depression, Weakley left home and wound up in the Sacramento Valley working on farms and orchards. There he witnessed firsthand the hardships faced by farm workers and developed a life-long sense of solidarity with the farmworker cause.

Next came a short stint at sea in the merchant marines. A short stint that made a lasting impression.

"They didn't have any rights or anything else in those days," Weakley said. "And the food was full of weevils. You washed with salt water. Bed bugs. Looked like hell. No air conditioning, hardly any decent potable water to drink, nowhere to wash your clothes except salt water. It was like Captain Bly."

Weakley said he learned the hard way about discrimination against union members.

"I got fired off a ship because I was a member of the Marine Fireman's union," he said. "They didn't give me a nickel. They kicked me off in Baltimore." He caught a freight to Mobile, Alabama and eventually found his way back to San Francisco, where he took a job as an oiler for Atlas Imperial Diesel Engine Co. in Oakland.

Weakley worked the graveyard shift, at straight time. His memories of the job were not fond ones.

"The wages were lousy, the company was lousy. I was getting \$12 a week. I gave my mother \$8 and I kept \$4. It was hard work."

But shortly after his 19th birthday, in 1934, Weakley found himself swept up in one of the epic labor struggles of the 20th century. Harry Bridges, the charismatic longshoreman leader, launched the San Francisco maritime strike, which was about to become the great San Francisco General Strike.

"We all went out on strike," recalled Weakley. "We didn't have a union, but we went out on strike anyway. The whole works just shut down and walked out. Everybody was fed up."

The strike was serious business and would eventually culminate in the police shooting deaths of two strikers on "Bloody Thursday." But for a 19-year-old kid full of working class moxie, it was the chance to fight on the side of the angels.

In one of many actions, strikers encircled the Howard Terminal in Oakland, holding the scabs inside. The police, in turn, encircled the strikers, cutting off their supplies.

Weakley and some of his cohorts "borrowed" an unattended tug boat in San Francisco, loaded it up with supplies, and took the tug across the bay under cover of night, with Weakley serving as diesel mechanic. They pulled up to the dock in Oakland, where men

awaited to unload sandwiches, cigarettes and other supplies for the strikers.

“Then we beached the damn thing on the mudflats at low tide and just disappeared,” Weakley recalled in 1990, relishing the memory. “The paper said *Pirates!*”

Allied Imperial gave a nickel-an-hour raise as the strike was being settled, but Weakley decided to join the Navy instead. Four years later, after he was discharged, he landed a job with the Bay Area Key Transit System, working the 1939 Treasure Island World’s Fair.

Twelve years later Weakley would be leading a new union representing those Key System employees as well as thousands of workers at Pacific Gas & Electric and many other California employers.

Those 12 years were epic ones in the history of American labor. The journey began in 1940, when 25-year-old Ron Weakley walked into PG&E offices in San Francisco and got hired on as a laborer at \$4 a day.

Formidable Challenge

PG&E was a formidable challenge to labor organizers seven decades ago, but it didn’t take Weakley long to find people willing to take the company on.

In early 1941 he met with a small group of men in the bar of a run-down hotel in Concord. Many of them, Weakley included, were watch engineers at PG&E steam plants in the East Bay. They were proud men who believed they got little respect on the job and that their wages and working conditions were obnoxious. They also agreed that to get the strength they needed to deal with PG&E, they would have to organize the entire company—top to bottom, north to south, east to west, men and women, physical and clerical. One big union on the system.



Ron Weakley in Concord, CA in 1941. Twenty-six years old and ready to cause trouble.

Weakley stood out.

“He acted like he had the experience and the background to know what to do and what to expect. And we just followed,” recalled Ray Michaels, one of the men attending the meeting.

“We were united in a single purpose to get a union,” Weakley explained in 1962. “We weren’t yakking about how unions had too much power and how we didn’t need one, like some poor misguided souls today. We sought a union to regain our dignity first and then to improve our wages and conditions.”

On April 17, 1941 Weakley and his fellow organizers obtained a charter from the Utility Workers Organizing Committee (UWOC), affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). A year later, they

petitioned the National Labor Relations Board to represent PG&E physical employees in the East Bay. The NLRB certified the UWOC on June 20, 1942.

But PG&E wasn't about to roll over. The company simply refused to bargain.

And PG&E wasn't the only problem.

A second union, the IBEW, had a following among some PG&E linemen that dated back to the early 1900s. IBEW was an old-style craft union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor and not interested in organizing "unskilled" workers. But feeling threatened by the industrial campaign brewing at PG&E, the IBEW launched its own company-wide organizing drive and chartered Local 1245 in 1941 to carry it out.

From the beginning there was a raw edge to this contest. L.L. Mitchell, who sided with the IBEW, remembered fistfights on the docks in the late 1930s between linemen loyal to the IBEW and those inspired by the CIO. When the two organizing drives began in earnest in 1941, feelings only intensified.

PG&E, able to play the unions against each other, seemed to have the strongest hand.

But PG&E was trumped by World War II. The National War Labor Board did not tolerate PG&E's stalling tactics and in late 1942 began imposing settlements.

An Audacious Move

Over the next couple of years, Weakley and the UWOC gained contracts at PG&E locations throughout the Bay Area, while IBEW organized the outlying areas. In 1944 both unions succeed in getting master agreements for all of the territory they controlled. The contracts weren't great, but they were a beginning.

After the war, though, Weakley's dream of one big union seemed to be slipping away. The two unions had fought each other to a standstill. And there was trouble brewing within the UWOC, which in 1946 gained recognition by the CIO as a national union—the Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA).

America after the war was in the grip of anti-communist hysteria, and the labor movement was not immune. At the UWUA's founding convention in 1946, Weakley and other California utility workers came under attack.

"They depicted us on the West Coast as 'Red Hots' (communists) and so forth," said Weakley. "They created enemies in order to get control of the union."

The abuse was even worse at the 1947 convention.

Longshoremen leader Harry Bridges, under attack himself by "anti-red" forces within the CIO, sympathized with Weakley's position. He told Weakley that his union of utility workers could headquarter at the Longshoreman's hall if they got kicked out of the UWUA.

Weakley, the former merchant marine and Navy veteran, began to think about jumping ship.

Accompanied by one of his close associates, Don Hardie, Weakley met secretly with IBEW officials in Oakland. They proposed a deal, which in essence was this: we'll try to convince our members to come over to the IBEW and help you organize PG&E if you let us run our local how we want it run.

"We decided to dump (the UWUA) and join the IBEW, with a view toward achieving what the company feared most of all, which was building one system-wide industrial union on these properties," Weakley said.



IBEW International President J. Scott Milne, middle, with Local 1245 Business Manager Ron Weakley, left, and Senior Assistant Business Manager L. L. Mitchell about 1954. Weakley said Milne's support was instrumental in bringing Weakley's CIO group into the IBEW.

In late 1948, IBEW headquarters in Washington DC established a new local to accommodate Weakley's forces: IBEW Local 1324.

It was an audacious move on Weakley's part, and full of risk.

PG&E fought him every step of the way, red-baiting him mercilessly during NLRB hearings to establish the scope of the proposed bargaining unit. The national leadership of the UWUA, outraged at the prospect of losing its foothold at PG&E, put up ferocious resistance. The leaders of IBEW Local 1245, which had been fighting Weakley tooth and nail since 1941, didn't want to have anything to do with him.

But Weakley had support where it counted: from the rank and file leaders who shared his vision and recognized his leadership. Those

stalwarts of the Utility Workers Organizing Committee included Don Hardie, Tom Riley, Ray Michaels, Mert Walters, Stan Dahlin, Les Glasson, Ed White, William Haars, Ed Hanlon, Bill Kennedy, Milt Ingraham, Gene Hastings, and many others whose names were never captured in print.

Their job was to convince their fellow workers to follow them into the IBEW.

"Many people got hurt in this process and much bitterness prevailed. We (faced) company finks, commies, imported industrial agents, and a hostile business community," Weakley said in 1962. "While we were at it we had a ball fighting among ourselves and I can assure you that at more than one meeting somebody called the cops."

It took three years for the IBEW to completely defeat the UWUA in system-wide elections at PG&E, and to consolidate the old Local 1245 with the new Local 1324 (as well as some other IBEW jurisdictions). The name of the newly consolidated union would be Local 1245. A reborn Local 1245.

Weakley was the obvious choice for Business Manager of this mammoth new union, but a representative from the old Local 1245 contested for the position.

"My people wanted me, and some of his wanted him," Weakley recalled many years later. "So finally they said you two go out and talk it over and come back and tell us which it's going to be. They gave us a bottle of liquor and said go up to your room and talk about it."

"We cancelled all our contracts (in 1953), took strike votes and took on the PG&E and all other employers in our jurisdiction and the world in general."

Ron Weakley

Weakley emerged as business manager. The bottle was still mostly full.

Taking on the World

In 1952 Weakley beat back a last challenge from the UWUA. Finally unified, the new IBEW Local 1245 was ready to march.

“We cancelled all our contracts, took strike votes and took on the PG&E and all other employers in our jurisdiction and the world in general,” Weakley said.

The IBEW, which had subsidized the long organizing drive, said it was now time for the local union to fly on its own.

“So we had to get a dues increase the same time we were trying to get our first system-wide contract,” Weakley recalled in 1990. “And I

was faced with running for election in the middle of all this.”

Having a unified membership gave the union new clout with PG&E. L.L. Mitchell became Weakley’s lead negotiator.

Wages began to climb. An ambitious program to improve “fringe benefits” was launched. The union gained the power to take grievances to arbitration.

Weakley never wavered from his early belief that workers everywhere had an inalienable right to be in a union. In the 1960s, under Weakley’s leadership, Local 1245 organized Pacific Gas Transmission, the United States Bureau of Reclamation, Merced Irrigation District, Nevada Irrigation District, Richvale Irrigation District, the City of Healdsburg, the



The amalgamated staff of IBEW Local 1324 and 1245 consisted of, standing from left: Jerry Moran, Charley Massie, Mert Walters, Scott Wadsworth, Al Hanson, Gene Hastings, Ed White, Harry Bollard, Weakley, and Cy Yochem. Kneeling from left: Fred Lucas, Delbert Petty, Al Kaznowski, Elmer Bushby, Lee Andrews, Jim Cribbs, Howard Sevey, and L.L. Mitchell (who is not shown because he was taking the picture.)



Ron Weakley, right, meeting in the 1960s with US Senator Alan Cranston, middle, and IBEW Local 1245 President Leland Thomas.

City of Redding, the City of Santa Clara, Truckee-Donner Public Utility District, the Tri-Dam project, and Plumas-Sierra Rural Electric.

Line clearance tree trimmers working on PG&E property were also organized: Davey Tree and Pacific Tree (later known as Asplundh).

In 1964 Local 1245 gained jurisdiction for Outside Line Construction work.

“If they wanted to be organized, we organized them,” Weakley said.

Under Weakley, Local 1245 also organized attendants, porters and food service workers at a Navy hospital. The union organized part of the Naval air station in Alameda, a group of x-ray workers, the Citizens Utilities phone company, and BART technicians.

In some cases the International office took away these new units and reassigned them to other IBEW locals. Weakley was outraged by this interference. But he was the consummate practical politician, never so concerned about saving face that he would shoot himself in the foot. He saved his energy for serving the members who elected him.

At PG&E, the union bargained a percentage contribution toward employee health premiums. It also bargained a stock savings plan—the first in the gas and electric utility industry.



With L. L. “Mitch” Mitchell (seated right) as his chief negotiator, Weakley (standing left) laid the foundation for the labor agreement with PG&E, now recognized as setting the standard for wages and benefits in the utility industry.



Local 1245 staff, in 1960 or 1961. Front row, from left: Howard Sevey, office manager; Mark Cook, business rep; Larry Foss, business rep; Jack Wilson, business rep; John Wilder, business rep; and Mert Walters assistant business manager. Back row: Norm Amundson, business rep and Utility Reporter editor; Roy Murray, business rep; Jim McMullin, business rep; Gene Hastings, business rep; L.L. Mitchell, assistant business manager; Ron Weakley, business manager; Ed James, business rep; Al Kaznowski, business rep; Scott Wadsworth, business rep; Dan McPeak, business rep; Al Hansen, assistant business manager; Frank Quadros, business rep; and Spike Ensley, business rep.

Vacation allowance was increased. Sick leave was expanded. Time-and-a-half for overtime was negotiated. A new Master Apprenticeship Agreement formalized the training for 12 different classifications at PG&E. Safety conditions were improved.

Paid meals was a big issue. “It used to be they just worked you and dumped you and that’s it,” said Weakley in 1990. “Now they have to provide a meal, or money in lieu of” after a certain amount of time worked.

The union won larger pensions, now fully paid by the company. The union also negotiated a new fully-paid long-term disability plan—the first in the industry.

And after decades of disputes over hours, the

union negotiated an historic Hours Clarification Agreement.

Mixing It Up with Members

As leader of the union, Weakley didn’t seal himself off in the castle tower. He attended unit meetings when he could, and he wasn’t shy about mixing it up with disgruntled members.

At a unit meeting in San Francisco, with 300 members in attendance, Weakley was confronted by a member upset by something he had written in the Utility Reporter.

“I had written a column wherein I had pointed out that our people were not only skilled utility workers but also skilled musicians,



Ron Weakley, left, greets Vice President Hubert Humphrey in Tracy, CA in 1968. Humphrey, a strong labor supporter, was campaigning for President.

photographers, artists and had all other types of attributes.”

As Weakley recalled it, a member stood up and said, “Hey Weakley, what’s all this intellectual stuff I’ve been reading in your column in the Utility Reporter? As far as I’m concerned you’re an intellectual asshole.”

People applauded. Weakley knew he had to respond. “So I said, ‘Well, I’m better off than you because you’re just a plain asshole,’ and people applauded that, too.”

Weakley and the member were able later to patch things up.

On another occasion Weakley was publicizing the death benefit the union had just established. He was proud of it, figured it would help solidify members’ support for the union.

“I trumpeted that at a meeting once down south, I think in Fresno, and a guy got up and said, ‘Big deal, you gotta die to get it.’ ”

Weakley learned, as all business managers do, that members sometimes ignore everything the union has accomplished for them—all the wages and benefits—in order to focus on a single complaint.

Weakley attended a unit meeting in San Jose to discuss a change in the way wages were determined—a change that ended up benefitting troublemen.

“This guy got up—he was half gassed—and he said, ‘It costs me just as much to get a bottle of milk as it does the Troubleshooter so why should they get a wage settlement?’”

“If you didn’t buy so much wine,” Weakley responded, “you might be able to afford more milk.”

The member, Weakley said, “stormed out and drove away—in a Mercedes.”

Members were always full of surprises. When the phone rang, there was no telling what might be in store.

“Once we got a call from a woman in Salinas wanting a thousand dollar check. She said she



Ron Weakley is received at the White House by President Lyndon B. Johnson, May 23, 1966.



Members of Weakley's staff in the 1950s and 1960s reunited at the union's 50th anniversary celebration in Concord in 1991. From left: Ron Weakley, Spike Ensley, Ed James, Orv Owen, Larry Foss, L.L. Mitchell, Dan McPeak and Mert Walters.

was the wife of a guy who just died," Weakley recalled. She wanted the death benefit. Weakley told the woman that the union required a death certificate as proof.

"She said, 'I don't need any proof because I shot the guy last night.'" The woman was calling from jail.

The union eventually paid her the benefit "because she was the guy's wife and he was dead." Weakley said he believed the union later amended the plan.

Democracy for Members

Weakley was a personable man, comfortable among the members. But he was also a man with an eye on the big picture. When Local 1245 was being established under his leadership, he thought long and hard about how the union should be structured.

"The old 1245 was a centralized thing, the executive board had all the power and that was it," he once said. The CIO locals that he helped organize in the early 1940s, on the other hand, "were very democratic, but so democratic that we could hardly ever get a majority to agree on anything."

Weakley decided to borrow elements from both traditions.

Like the old Local 1245, the new union had a

strong business manager, someone with the exclusive authority to hire and fire staff and to represent the union in dealings with the employers.

From the CIO, he learned a strong commitment to democracy that he wasn't prepared to surrender under any circumstances. He believed that a union must be "based on the fundamental policy of control that begins and ends with the membership of the local."

More than 50 years later Local 1245's structure still embodies this principle, with a democratically elected business manager, officers and executive board. Local units based throughout the union's jurisdiction give



Ron Weakley at the grand opening of Local 1245's new headquarters in Vacaville, Ronald T. Weakley Hall, on Oct. 18, 2003.

But the crown jewel in this democratic structure, and Weakley's pride and joy, was the creation of an Advisory Council of rank and file members who are elected by region and who have the power to challenge Executive Board decisions.

members an opportunity to participate on a regular basis and to elect their own unit officers.

But the crown jewel in this democratic structure, and Weakley's pride and joy, was the creation of an Advisory Council of rank and file members who are elected by region and who have the power to challenge Executive Board decisions.

By a majority vote, members of the Council "have the authority to order a referendum—it goes out to the entire membership to vote on it," Weakley explained. "So that's a pretty heavy hammer on centralized dictatorship."

The Advisory Council rarely exercises this authority, but did so earlier this year when it challenged the Executive Board over two decisions concerning qualifications for serving on the Executive Board. The members, voting at over 100 unit meetings, sided with the Advisory Council on one decision, and with the Executive Board on the other.

While Weakley clearly loved the challenges of leading a progressive union, the job also took its toll. Once in the early 1950s, before the dues structure was fully worked out, Weakley had to cut staff.

"One of the members I had to lay off committed suicide," he recalled. "That wasn't very easy for me to take."

Another committed suicide after leaving the staff. "I always felt a sort of personal responsibility for some of these things that happened to some of the guys. There's been a lot of tragedy along the road," said Weakley.

The stresses of union work probably contributed to several divorces. Weakley's own first marriage fell apart in the 1950s.

But Weakley, always resilient, married again in 1955, to Ethel Loesch. It was easy to see why they might end up together. Like her husband, Ethel Loesch Weakley came from fighting stock. Her mother, a Russian immigrant living in Connecticut, once sheltered a group of West Virginia union miners who were hiding from Pinkerton goons.

Ethel was still with Ron 52 years later, when he died on Oct. 11 at their home in Molokai, HI.

Weakley remained keenly interested in union and world affairs to his last days. In 2003, Local 1245 named its new headquarters in Weakley's honor. At the grand opening, invited to make a few remarks, Weakley showed he hadn't lost his combative edge.

"I note that another Ronald—Ronald Reagan—has his name on a federal building, and an airport, and now an aircraft carrier. That's quite a distinction, very impressive. But there's one thing that I have over him: he'll never have his name on a union office building!"

But Weakley's true legacy is not contained in a building. His legacy is the union itself, and the strength it continues to give working people to act together for the betterment of all.

—Eric Wolfe

For more on Local 1245 history, go to:
[www.ibew1245.com/history-pages/
historyPGEintro.html](http://www.ibew1245.com/history-pages/historyPGEintro.html)