

INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD OF
ELECTRICAL WORKERS

LOCAL UNION 131



KALAMAZOO, MICHIGAN

SKILL, CRAFTSMANSHIP, EXCELLENCE

IBEW LOCAL 131

KALAMAZOO, MI

110th Anniversary

EST. SEPT. 14, 1916

110th Anniversary

COMMEMORATIVE HISTORY

1916 - 2026

Platinum SPONSOR

CONGRATULATIONS ON 110 YEARS!



Proudly Serving Lower Michigan Since 1961

www.mooreelectrical.com

LOCAL UNION 131

110 *years*
1916-2026

Your IBEW family joins
in celebrating 110 years
of brotherhood

Congratulations on your anniversary!



International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers

Kenneth W. Cooper, International President

Paul A. Noble, International Secretary-Treasurer

Michael J. Clemmons, International Vice President, Sixth District

www.ibew.org



SKILL

EXCELLENCE

SEPT. 14



I.B.E.W. LOCAL 131 110TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION DINNER-DANCE

Saturday, September 12, 2026
5:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.

Gun Lake Casino
1123 129th Ave, Wayland, Michigan

Registration, Cocktail Hour & Hors d'Oeuvres 5:00 – 6:30 p.m.
Dinner (Buffet) & Dessert 6:30 – 7:30 p.m.
Speakers, Awards & Presentations 7:30 – 8:30 p.m.
Live Music & Dancing 9:00 – 11:00 p.m.



Celebrating A Legacy Reflected In Today's Local 131

Brothers and Sisters:

This book documents some of the history of I.B.E.W. Local Union No. 131. It cannot capture it all, but it illuminates a narrative of hard work, solidarity, fortitude and reward that colors our past and may guide our future.

In the 110 years since our founding, so much has changed that our forefathers would hardly recognize the world of today. Yet, we can see reflections of their struggles in ours – and the fruits of their labor can be seen in our lives. The aims of the I.B.E.W. (fair wages, decent retirement, manageable hours of work, comradery and respect) are as relevant and real today as they were at our founding.

Kalamazoo may be thought of as a college town by many, but our members know it has always been dominated by industry. In the early 20th century, nearly a quarter of Kalamazoo residents were employed in the paper industry, and over the decades, it also hosted textile mills, Gibson Guitar Manufacturing, Checker Cab Company, General Motors, Bell Telephone Co., Upjohn, Campbell Soup and a myriad of other industrial titans that have come and gone, and in some cases come back (see Palisades).

Old heads might remember the names of the contractors who worked those jobs, but it's the I.B.E.W.'s mark that has withstood time. It's the I.B.E.W. and its members that trained electricians, that brought them wages, healthcare, retirement and loyalty across generations. The resolve of those members has bore fruit for thousands of Kalamazoo electricians over the last century. It's the I.B.E.W.'s vision for comradery, craftsmanship and decency that endures. It is our charge to carry that vision forward.

That is why we must take a moment to reflect on our history. To celebrate the victories. To pay homage to the past, to hold dearly the graces of today and to step boldly into a future as challenging and promising in 2026 as it was in 1916.

Please enjoy this evening and study this history. Celebration and commemoration bind us together through shared joy and experience. It is a moment earned by our members and a past worth observing.

Fraternally and with immeasurable gratitude,

Jonathan Current, Wireman & Business Manager
I.B.E.W. Local Union No. 131, Kalamazoo

I'd be remiss not to thank the staff who put our 110-year celebration together. First and foremost, Christine Bohms, who organized and orchestrated this event with Gun Lake Casino staff and Union Histories. Nicole Miller, who supported all of our efforts. And Ryan Lewis, who is the best organizer of wireman we could hope for, a great friend and the most entertaining office mate who belongs nowhere near an office.



This book was proudly produced by

UNION HISTORIES™
Preserving the Proud Stories of Local Unions
unionhistories.com

I.B.E.W. Local 131 and Union Histories give special thanks to the following for their contributions to this book:

Curtis Bateman, Manager and Curator, I.B.E.W. Museum
Local 131 Retirees Club
Kalamazoo Public Library, Clarence L. Miller Local History Room
Local 131 Office Manager Christine Bohms

Head Historian: Calvin Jefferson

Art Direction: Andy Taucher

Layout & Design: Steven Demanett



The 110-Year History of I.B.E.W. Local 131, Kalamazoo

Serving Southwest Michigan's Electrical Needs *Since 1916*

“When the late Harley McDaniel was one of only seven members of the electrical workers union in southwestern Michigan, people trying to get the union started hid their union cards in one of their shoes.

“They used to meet in each other’s basement so employers didn’t know who they were,’ said McDaniel’s son, Dick. ‘It was kind of a tough organization to be a member of at the time.’

“They’d find a good hand and approach them and say, ‘Would you like to become a member and protect your income and livelihoods and try to make a better life for yourself?’

“Back in the early 1920s, ‘electrical work was a very, very dangerous occupation’ and the primary reason the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers was organized was for safety.

“But union organizers like his father had the saying, ‘Put your I.B.E.W. ticket in your shoe and keep your mouth shut.’ You didn’t want anybody to know you belong to it until (the union) got the power.”

— Kalamazoo Gazette, September 30, 1991, article marking Local 131’s 75th Anniversary



At the turn of the 20th Century, the City of Kalamazoo, Michigan, underwent a rapid physical and economic transformation that converted it from a low-rise, traditional merchant town into a modern, vertically growing industrial hub while the area economy likewise flourished with intensive agriculture and manufacturing expansion, particularly paper mills and carriage/automotive works. Then, with the completion of the eight-story Kalamazoo National Bank Building, modern steel-frame construction was introduced to the city that launched a local high-rise boom that culminated in even taller structures such as the 10-story Hanselman Building that beginning in 1913 when it opened stood as the city’s tallest building for 60 years.

But while during the late 1800s and early 1900s inside wiremen and outside linemen in Kalamazoo attempted to organize into union locals of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (I.B.E.W.), Kalamazoo was decidedly non-union at the time. As such, even though the city rapidly transformed into a premier industrial center, local workers faced hostile employers and encountered local courts that actively suppressed strikes through aggressive anti-union legal injunctions.

Subsequently, three I.B.E.W. locals that were organized in Kalamazoo before 1906 failed to survive, beginning with **Local No. 62**, which the union chartered on March 2, 1896, but was defunct by that October.



The I.B.E.W. then established **Local No. 312** on September 17, 1902, but it was defunct by May the following year, after which the union chartered **Local No. 395** on April 10, 1903, but declared it defunct in June 1905.

Nearly eight years later, the union attempted to again place a permanent local in the city, chartering “mixed” wiremen and linemen **Local No. 327** on April 19, 1913, most of which’s members were linemen employed by the **Commonwealth Power Company**. But the new local came into existence during a bitter internal conflict within the I.B.E.W. that in 1908 had divided the union into two competing factions: a splinter group of mostly outside locals that elected James J. Reid as its president and James W. Murphy as its secretary during a special convention in 1908, and the original I.B.E.W. whose locals remained with sitting officers President Frank J. McNulty and Secretary Peter W. Collins.

The so-called “**Reid-Murphy Split**” was driven by dissension between wiremen and linemen, disappointed office-seekers and a former grand treasurer removed from office in 1907 because of “irregularities,” as *History of The I.B.E.W.* describes. With the

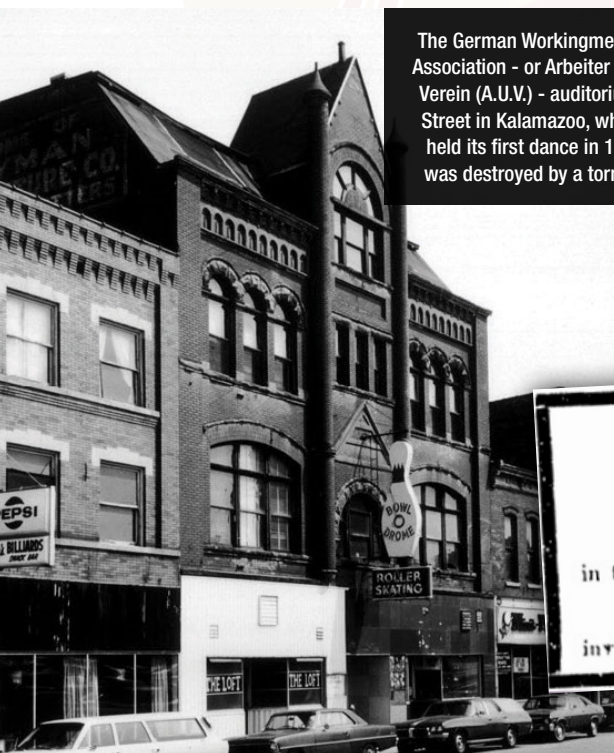
seceding locals refusing to recognize President McNulty and Secretary Collins as the true officers of the I.B.E.W., two opposing union conventions were held in 1911.

During its very first general meeting on May 27, 1913, the officers and membership of the new Kalamazoo Local 327 discussed which side of the ongoing quarrel they should align, with John E. McEvery of Chicago representing the “McNulty branch” and Oliver Myers of Toledo representing the “Reid faction” in attendance. The next evening, the fledgling local’s 22 members met again in the Bartender Union’s Hall on West Main Street and voted to remain with the “original” I.B.E.W.

A court decision in February 1912 declared the 1908 Reid-Murphy convention illegal and its actions void and nearly all of the locals that had broken away attended the I.B.E.W.’s 12th convention in Boston in 1913. Regardless, just three years later Local 327 – still attempting to exist in a markedly non-union environment – went defunct sometime right before September 1916.

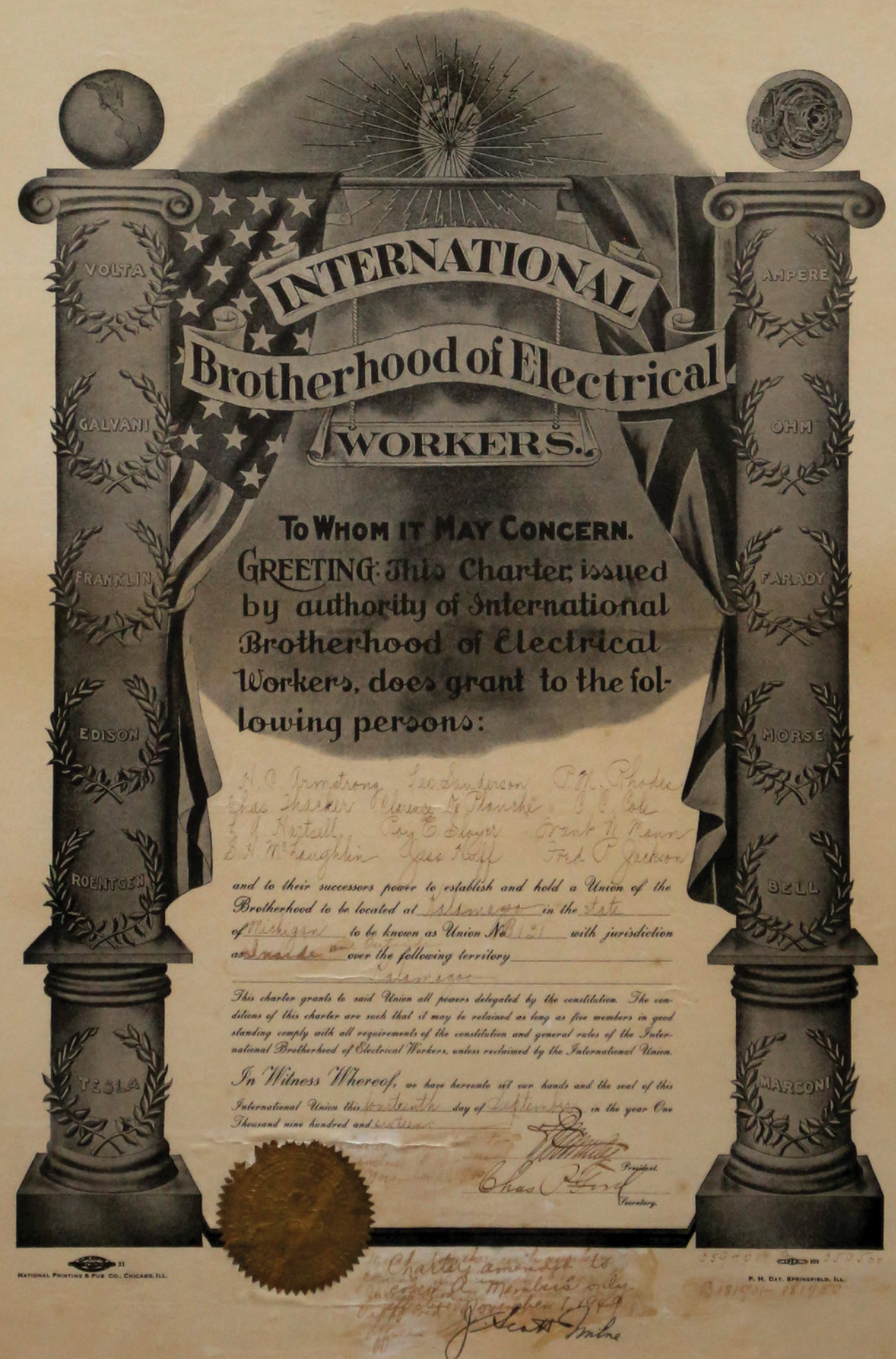
Still undeterred, however, and compelled by the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.) “Labor Forward” movement that pushed efforts to organize workers across the country, on September 5, 1916, nearly every electrical worker in Kalamazoo met to form a union local once again. Soon after, the I.B.E.W. chartered yet another mixed local, **Local No. 131**, on **September 14, 1916**, to serve the electrical industry of the city ... but unlike its predecessors, Local 131 would endure – for the next 110 years and beyond.

The German Workingmen's Benevolent Association - or Arbeiter Unterstutzungs Verein (A.U.V.) - auditorium on Portage Street in Kalamazoo, where Local 131 held its first dance in 1916. (The hall was destroyed by a tornado in 1980.)



The Electrical Workers
Union No. 131, Will Give a
DANCE
Wednesday Dec. 20
in the A. U. V. hall, Portage street. Solomon's Orchestra.
50c a couple. Extra ladies 25c.
All Electrical workers and their friends are cordially
invited.

Announcement for a Local 131 dance on December 20, 1916.



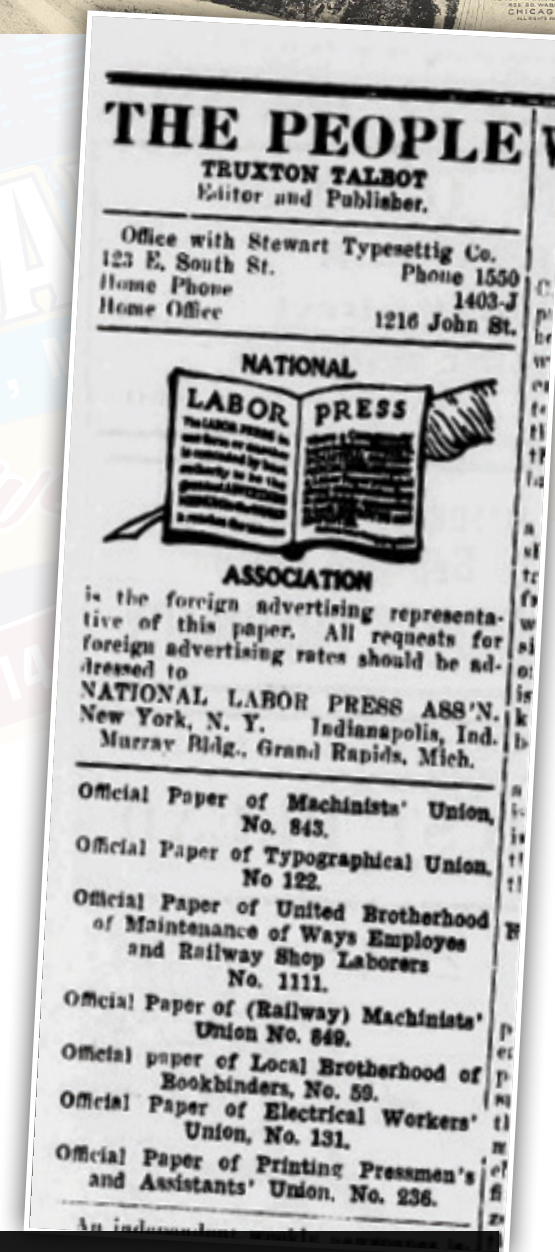


Overcoming Opposition, Establishing Its Footing

The new Local 131, which initially met every Thursday in the **Trades & Labor Hall** on South Burdick Street in Kalamazoo, was composed of about 50 members who were mostly telephone workers and inside electrical wiremen. By May 1917, the local had already grown to 65 members, but it was struggling with getting many of them to attend meetings, as **Press Secretary C. C. Cole** divulged in the I.B.E.W. *Journal* magazine that month while also announcing, “We are going to have an open meeting and a little feed next Thursday night and hope to interest a few.”

At the time, working conditions in the city were not very favorable, although all of the local’s members were working as the **Bell Telephone Company** kept many union electrical workers busy. But with **Michigan Light Company** not employing as many members, the press secretary wrote of the utility company, “After most of their linemen joined the union, they weren’t needed much longer.”

Local 131 **Secretary-Treasurer Ralph Oakwood** was charged with and admitted to embezzling the local’s funds in April 1921. He was caught having appropriated \$681.21 in dues and assessments paid by members “for his own use,” the *Kalamazoo Gazette* reported on April 11 that year.



Local 131 paid \$5 to Mr. Truxton Talbot on March 5, 1919, to subscribe to *The People*, which its members had “unanimously adopted” as the local’s official newspaper.

What’s more, with the United States entering World War I after declaring war on the German Empire on April 6, 1917, Brother Cole further disclosed that “a few” of the local’s members “have enlisted (into military service) and the rest are ready to.” Meanwhile, construction of **U.S. Army Camp Custer** near Kalamazoo to train soldiers for the war (it would host more than 100,000 troops) provided jobs for Local 131 members.

Work was otherwise slow for the local during 1917 and 1918 as construction in its jurisdiction was sluggish, for the most part, during those years – and Kalamazoo remained a largely “open-shop,” non-union city. The local did send a delegate, **Brother Edward G. Smith**, to the I.B.E.W. Convention in 1917, but he was there representing only 41 members from his hometown.

In early 1919, the city began a housing-construction boom that jolted employment opportunities for the local’s members, who numbered over 100 inside electricians and outside linemen when March arrived. “The local building outlook at this time is exceptionally bright for organized labor,” Ray Wanzo of the city’s carpenters union told the April 6, 1919, *Kalamazoo Gazette*. “There are about 35 houses in course of construction in the city and the building work is giving employment to practically all the trades allied with the **Building Trades Council**” (of which Local 131 was a member).

The local’s 40 electricians made good on a threat the following month and not one of them showed up for work on Saturday morning, May 3, 1919, after contractors refused to adhere to Local 131’s demands for union recognition throughout the city. The local had also asked for an increase in wages, the eight-hour workday, time-and-a-half for overtime and double-time for holiday work – all of which the employers at first denied.

That very afternoon, the contractors met again with the local’s officials and an agreement

I.B.E.W. Local No. 131 Charter Signers

Henry C. Armstrong
(Electrician, AM Sign Company)

Clifford C. Cole
(Lineman, Consumers Power Company)

Clarence S. DePlanche
(Electrician)

Leo A. Hartsell
(Troubleman, Consumers Power Company)

Jesse C. Huff
(Repairman, Michigan State Telephone Company)

Frederick R. Jackson
(Electrician, U.S. Navy Reserves)

Frank W. Mann
(Electrician, Field Electric Shop)

Sidney McLaughlin
(Tester, Michigan State Telephone Company)

Paul M. Rhodes
(Foreman, Columbian Electrical Company)

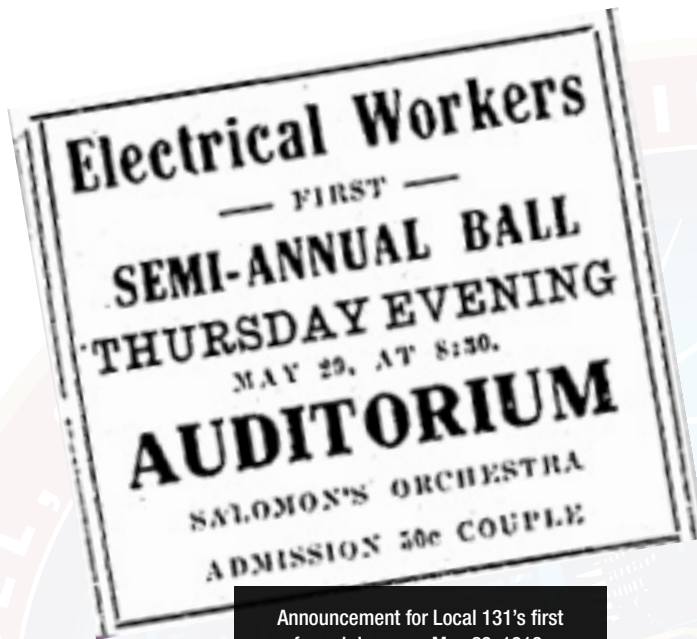
Leo Sanderson
(Electrician, Columbian Electrical Company)

Roy Sloyer
(Electrician)

Charles Thacker
(Lineman, Michigan State Telephone Company)

was signed, which “accedes to the demands made by the electrical workers and is declared to be quite satisfactory to the contractors,” the *Gazette* reported on May 4. The new, six-month contract, which would go into effect on the coming Monday, May 5, provided journeyman electrical workers with a raise to 60 cents per hour and helpers an increase to 45 cents per hour.

“The boys didn’t say much, just made their preparations and went to it and won,” *The People* newspaper, the city’s union publication, declared on May 8. “This should be a lesson to the street railway men and others.”



Announcement for Local 131's first formal dance on May 29, 1919.

Then in June, with the I.B.E.W. calling for a nationwide strike of its telephone linemen, repairmen, installers and key-board men, Local 131 **Business Agent R. H. Harrison** announced in the June 11, 1919, *Gazette* that the local “has voted unanimously to follow the dictates of the International Brotherhood and participate in the strike.” Sixty linemen and installers would be affected, while the local was already “lining up” 150 “girl” operators in the city, according to Brother Harrison.

The I.B.E.W. district council had already made demands to the **Michigan Bell Telephone Company** for a 50-percent increase in wages to 85 cents an hour for journeymen and 65 cents for helpers, as well as shortened working days of eight hours. The operators were asking for a 40-percent increase to their \$7- to \$14-per week salaries.

On the morning of June 17, the male employees walked off their jobs, as the demands had not been met, threatening to tie up all service – except for emergency calls – until their requests were fulfilled. Most operators remained on the job, according to news accounts.

“One of the reasons for the strike is the fact that the telephone linemen remained on their jobs throughout the war, when labor was so scarce that the laying off of a single man was a serious matter,” Brother Harrison also noted in the *Gazette*. However, in the end, the strike was not successful.

Then on June 23, Local 131 submitted a proposal to the City of Kalamazoo Commission asking for the eight-hour day for all civic electrical workers, which it was representing. The local also recommended that the city’s workmen receive pay of \$6 per day for linemen, \$4 per day for apprentice lineman, \$190 per month for troublemen (or service workers), \$160 per month for lamp trimmers (who maintained street lamps) and \$160 per month for foremen.

Three days later, *The People* reported that the city manager recommended that the union’s proposal not be accepted. The city commissioner’s subsequent suggestion that the Commission meet with the local’s business agent was rebuffed by Commission members.

Again on July 28, Local 131 requested a conference with the city officials to discuss increasing the pay of city electricians. However, the City Commission that evening voted, 6 to 1, against the meeting.

The local was far from deterred by the setback, and in October staged another half-day “demonstration,” as *The People* described it in an October 16, 1919, article, to win a new agreement for its non-city electrical workers. The local was successful and again won the 44-hour week, with Saturday afternoons off (except that one man in each shop would stay on the job for four hours each Saturday afternoon, at straight time); time-and-a-half for all overtime up to midnight; double-time between the hours of midnight and 5 a.m. and for all Sunday and holiday work; and a straight scale of 80 cents per hour for journeymen.

The newspaper reported that the shops that signed the new, one-year agreement on October 1 were “Hinkley, Columbia, Close, Plating, Becker, Snyder and Shilling.” It went on to note, “These are the only shops in the city now employing forces of electricians, (and) the other small shops have agreed to abide by the new scale when hiring men.”

That year, **Brother Harry E. Oswald** attended the 15th I.B.E.W. Convention, representing the local’s 105 members.

In the glow of victory as the decade was coming to a close, Brother Harrison reflected on Local 131’s first few years in a column in the December 1919 *Journal*:

“This Local had a hard row to hoe. It has certainly had its ups and downs, but since it was last brought to life we have been doing some business. ... We have the Bell boys pretty well lined up, but it is absolutely impossible to make a one-town stand and get any increase in wage. ... But at that we have not lost a Bell man yet, and are still in hopes we can some day bring Mother Bell to her knee. ... We are unable to do anything with the Consumers Power Company, although we have part of them lined up. But nearly as fast as we get them the company is letting them go. So you see what we are up against.”

Organizing Makes Gains Before Paper Mills Boom

Local 131 forged ahead with its varied and various missions into and throughout the 1920s. In one particular action to support its city, its industry and its membership, the local in early 1920 joined the **Citizen’s Publicity Committee**, which was running advertisements to lobby for the installation of improved street-car service in Kalamazoo.

More directly, the local that year began bargaining for a raise in journeyman wages to \$1.12 per hour before going on a two-week-

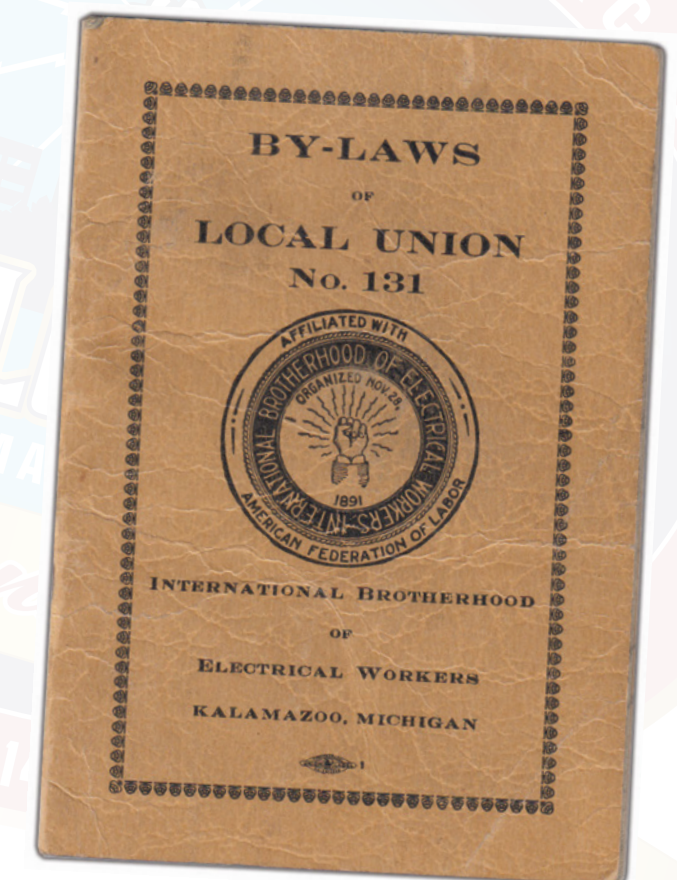


Local 131 Trade Classifications

Local No. 131 was chartered in 1916 as a “Mixed” local of inside wiremen, outside linemen and telephone employees. In 1955, the local was re-classified as an “inside”- only local. In 1968, the local added **Radio-Television Service** (rts) and **Sound and Public Address** (spa) to the classifications it represented. In 1972, the local added **Radio Television Broadcast** (rtb) to its classifications. In 2004, the local added **Sign Erectors** (se) to its classifications.

long strike in October. When the agreement was settled on October 12, the local gained a \$1 hourly salary and **Business Agent Ralph Oakwood** commented in the October 13 *Gazette* “that the settlement is satisfactory to the union in every way and that there is little danger of a return of trouble in the future.”

But another wage controversy erupted just months later in January 1921 when all building-





Local 131 members at the 1931 Labor Day parade: (front, left to right) Harry Keller, Herman VanBridge, Oscar Hodapp, Joe Juranski, Scotty Erwin, Zoe Walters, Paul Belco and Bruce Brown; and (back row) Howard Baker, Jack Sagers, Erick Mosen, Hilliard Clapp, "Slim" Fredericks, John Oswald, Vine VerHage, Herman Ruimveld, Clarence DePlanche, Floyd Puttnam, Len Summers, Clair Rowen and Lloyd Chaddock Sr.

trades contractors in the City of Kalamazoo announced they would reduce the wages of all construction workers, the electricians being decreased to 80 cents per hour, effective February 3. When the contractors actually made the cuts in late February, most of the trades walked off their jobs and out of their shops.

Three electrical shops reduced wages to 90 cents, but the union men at two of the shops refused to accept it. Subsequently, Local 131 **President Bert G. Davis** and **Secretary George B. Allen** issued a statement through the March 10, 1921, *Gazette*:

"Local Union No. 131 ... (has) been locked out of the shops of the Colombian Electric Company and the Hinkley Electric Shops for refusing to accept a wage reduction of 10 cents per hour. The men will not accept any wage reduction, at least at this time, as conditions do not justify a reduction."



The Local 131 Labor Day 1931 parade float. That year, the local decreed that all of its members would march in the parade wearing "new pair of overalls, black shirt and black bow tie and shop cap" or be assessed \$1.

Indeed, work was plentiful during the early 1920s in and around Kalamazoo, and by January 1921, the Local 131 treasury had grown to a relatively substantial \$260. Brother Smith represented the local at the 16th I.B.E.W. Convention later that year, although the local's membership had dipped to 37 ... a trend that would continue through the decade.

Among the jobs on which members were working at the time was a project at Camp Custer, and several traveling I.B.E.W. brothers from other locals were working with Local 131.

In 1922, the I.B.E.W. created the **Electrical Workers Benefit Association** (E.W.B.A.) to ensure "sufficient resources to provide a dignified interment when an I.B.E.W. member passed away." In another show of support for its own membership, Local 131 on April 24, 1923, held the first meeting of its E.W.B.A. board – having announced during its regular March 21 membership meeting that it would pass out cigars at the Benefit Association board meeting.

Continuing to focus on its entire electrical industry, too, Local 131 in February 1924 sent a committee of two to meet with contractors to work on revising the city's electrical code.

The local also intensified its organizing efforts during this time. At its October 19, 1925, meeting, for instance, the local voted to hold an open meeting on November 2 and asked that "every member try and see all the non-union men and try to have them come up to the meeting and talk it over, and see if we can get together again."

During the November meeting, the local then approved a motion to give its financial secretary \$13 per month to "act as business agent in soliciting new members, in connection with his regular work."

However, those measures apparently had little effect as by the I.B.E.W. Convention in 1925, Local 131 reported only 16 members. For the 1927 convention, its delegate, Brother Smith, was representing just 21 members.

The lull in employment over the previous few years was broken with the construction of a new paper mill in Kalamazoo (which had long before become known as "Paper City" for its abundance of mills – a steady employer of Local 131 labor throughout the rest of the century). The project helped get all of the local's men off the "out-of-work bench" and even provided work for "quite a few" out-of-town I.B.E.W. travelers, **Press Secretary Harry Burbridge** announced in the July 1928 *Journal*.

Local 131 Business Managers

The office of Business Manager was not recognized until 1931; prior to that, I.B.E.W. locals assigned a Business Agent to conduct duties similar to those of a Business Manager. Local 131 did not have a full-time Business Manager until 1934, but the local's very first officers in 1916 were **Recording Secretary R. W. Hughes** and **Financial Secretary Leonard A. Hartwell**.

T. R. "Slim" Fredericks (part time) 1931	Richard Redford 1976 to 1988
(No Business Manager) 1931 to 1934	Rodney Leversee 1988 to 1992
O. Bruce Brown 1934 to 1940	Richard Redford 1992 to 1998
George E. Standley 1940 to 1948	Donald Bloink 1998 to 2000
Percy J. Smith 1948 to 1950	Patrick L. Klocke 2000 to 2007
L. Floyd Putnam 1950 to 1953	Leroy J. Crabtree 2007 to 2013
Eldon J. Chamberlin 1953 to 1960	Kraig R. Lee 2013 to 2019
James O. Stewart 1960 to 1962	Brian O'Donnell 2019 to 2022
Charles R. Anderson 1962 and 1964	Morris Applebey 2022 to 2025
Elvin Tripp 1964 to 1966	Jonathan Current 2025 to current
O. John Whisler 1966 to 1976	

The following year, the local again reported that all of its members were working, though membership remained stagnant as the local "was in the heart of an unorganized territory, where the open-shop plan prevails," Brother Burbridge wrote. Accordingly, the local sent no representative to the I.B.E.W. Convention in 1929.

Enduring Historic Strife, Still Opposing Non-Union

The **Great Depression** of the 1930s began with the U.S. stock market crash on



October 29, 1929 (“Black Tuesday”) – but the local economy of Kalamazoo remained relatively stable. The demand for paper and paper products during the Depression was strong, keeping the city’s many paper mills running – although at a diminished capacity – and employing 25 percent of Kalamazoo’s workforce at the time, according to *Gazette* archives.

Efforts to combat the effects of the Depression, most notably President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, did leave their marks on Kalamazoo while also aiding Local 131. The Federal funding plan to put people back to work helping to build schools, libraries, public buildings and housing projects under the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration included the **Kalamazoo County Courthouse**, which was wired by the local’s members during its construction from 1935 to 1937. Additional New Deal projects in the city were Waldo Stadium, the Douglass Community Center, infrastructure at Milham

Park and road, bridge, and sewer upgrades including the 1934 repaving of Main Street (which is now Michigan Avenue).

Feeling the increasing pinch of the collapsed economy, Local 131 in January 1930 stopped accepting the travel cards of I.B.E.W. brothers from other locals. In August 1931, only 33 members were in good standing, and by the following June, the local was unable to pay the dues of its “less-fortunate brothers.”

That July, to help members deal with unemployment, working dues were reduced to \$3 per month and non-working members would have to pay only \$2 in monthly dues. However, in September, the pay scale for Local 131 journeymen was reduced to 90 cents per hour – and the local was forced in January 1933 to fine any members for working for less than that wage.

The local continued to press on with its business during the historic down times; in

1934, for example, local officers met with contractors and warned them against using non-union workers. That year, the local membership also approved paying 1 cent per member to support an organizer to be hired by the **Kalamazoo Federation of Labor**.

Wages for Local 131 journeymen were back up to \$1 per hour by 1935, as work in the local’s city and jurisdiction became somewhat more consistent. The local’s working rules that year also stated that any members working on an “un-fair” (non-union) job would be fined \$4 per day.

Employment opportunities grew and continued to do so beginning in 1936, so much so that during its January 4, 1937, regular membership meeting, the local voted to hire a fulltime business manager. The local selected **Brother O. Bruce Brown** for the position.

By 1938, industrial work in and around Kalamazoo began to surge at an accelerated pace. Local 131 members by then were installing the electrical portion of the **Bryce E. Morrow Power Plant** steam-turbine generating facility on the Kalamazoo River at Comstock for the Consumers Power Company. When the two-year project was completed in 1939, it was the second largest plant in the state.

With the Depression winding down and work picking up in earnest, the locals of the Kalamazoo Building Trades Council went on strike on December 1, 1938, to force the city’s general contractors – and particularly the Miller-Davis Company – to recognize the closed union shop. “The strike is said by union members to be the first step in a program to obtain closed shop contracts from all general contractors in Kalamazoo,” the *Gazette* reported that day.

The work stoppage, which both sides said was not over wage differences, lasted over three



Local 131 Meeting Locations and Union Halls

Trades and Labor Hall, South Burdick Street
1916 to 1920

Moose Hall
1920

Metal Trades Hall
1920 to 1924

Carpenter’s Hall, 326 North Rose Street
1924 to 1954

Labor Temple, 839 Cedar Street
1954 to 1960

505 Davis Street
1960 to 1962

2918 Portage Street
1962 and 1964

Carpenters’ Hall, 326 North Rose Street
1964 to 1968

3617 Gembrit Circle
1968 to 2003

1473 North 30th Street, Galesburg
2003 to 2008

3641 East Cork Street
2008 to present



Kalamazoo County Courthouse, 1937 (Photo courtesy of CourthouseHistory.com.)



weeks and halted construction on several major projects, including those on which Local 131 members were working, such as additions to the city light plant and the Sutherland Paper Company plant. In the end, the locals did not win full recognition of their unions.



Powering A War Victory Then Thriving Afterward

The outbreak of **World War II** and the busy wartime economy of the 1940s put the Depression behind the nation and labor throughout the country. In fact, a survey conducted in March 1941 by the Chamber of Commerce showed that employment in the city was at its highest in history, the *Gazette* reported on April 24 that year.

Consequently, during Local 131's November 18, 1940, meeting, Brother Brown was able to report "all members working" – a theme he consistently repeated throughout the



Upjohn's Building No. 38 as construction nears completion in 1946.
(Photo courtesy of Memories of The Upjohn Company/upjohn.net.)

war. During the war years, members were employed particularly in factories throughout its jurisdiction.

Beginning in October 1940, many Local 131 members were also working at Camp Custer under Battle Creek's I.B.E.W. **Local No. 445** as part of the government's defense program. Before the year was out, over 860 buildings were completed at the fort, which was strictly a union job.

The Consumers Power Company was also building an addition to its power plant in Kalamazoo at the time, which would employ "a considerable number of men" from Local 131 before it was completed. Among other work, new construction for the Bryant Paper Company was underway with Local 131 labor, and that August 20, **Business Manager George E. Standley** announced to the membership, "Men (are) wanted by all contractors."

During the 1940s, pharmaceuticals giant **Upjohn**, which had been based in Kalamazoo since 1886 and was a consistent employer of Local 131 members, also enlarged and added to its facilities. The local helped build the company's Building 38, which when completed in 1946 was the first building opened on Upjohn's new **Portage Site**. The new campus contained several additional research and development laboratories and factories wired by Local 131 electrical workers when fully operational in 1951.

In order to help address its growing manpower needs, members on November 18, 1940, had voted to become a **"B"-classification** local to take in more workers. (The I.B.E.W. in 1935 created the "B"-type membership by referendum vote to allow unorganized workers in utilities and manufacturing plants to join the union at a lower admission fee of \$1.50 and a lower per capita of 50 cents; "B" members did not participate in death and pension benefits, since they did not pay for them.) The local would remain "B-131" through November 1949 (and would begin to take "BA" members, who do not pay into the pension, in 1954).

Also during that time, as its membership surged, the local started using a seniority system

for placement in its "book" through which jobs were assigned.

Meanwhile, the I.B.E.W. and the **National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA)** had created the **National Employees Benefit Agreement** on September 3, 1946. In accordance, Local 131's employees agreed to pay 1 percent of their gross labor payroll to the local's Employees Benefit Fund, which would help subsidize health and welfare benefits for members.

Then on November 12, the local and the Electrical Contractors Association of Kalamazoo reached a new contract agreement that included a journeyman's salary of \$2.25 per hour. The pact would be in effect from November 18 until April 30, 1947.

By that time, the war had ended, but the local continued to stay busy, primarily with the ongoing expansion of Upjohn, through the balance of the decade.



Electrical workers crew at a Sutherland Paper Company construction project in Kalamazoo on May 7, 1949.

The electrical crew working for Rowen & Blair on a construction project for Upjohn in Kalamazoo on July 21, 1950: (first row, left to right) Harry Oswald, J. Rizer, Carl Bishop, Ray Davis, Floyd Stevens, David Bergenham, E. Derhammer, Bert Crane, Clarence Sutton, H. Burbridge, L. Bishop, William Denaway, Ernie Tozer, M. Kintner, L. Delamater, F. A. Frost and Ed Sordelet; (second row) Walt Wiley, Pete Kuilema, A. Chamberlain, C. E. Noble, Bennie Horrocks, Joe Smittendorf, Lace Lowder, Bob Lowder, John Bonnes, Ray Markus, Jim Stewart, Bennie Pawlaczyk and Richard Emmons; (third row) Fred Kelly, C. Lovin, Ed Herrin, G. VanBruggan, Al Routsong, Harlan Marr, Leo Morrissey, John McGoff, Clyde Bull, B. Chappell, Ray Fitzgerald and Len Boers; (fourth row) Art Lawler, Joe Carlisle, George Sherwood, Harry Hill, Jack Smith, H. Follis, William Darby, William Gurr Jr., William Johnson, E. Buskirk, Henry Bahr and E. P. Bothwell; (fifth row) C. Hamilton, George Kniss, Red Buckallew, George Wilson, Erick Moessen, Carl Seseman, L. Frost, John Houart, March Austin, S. A. Snyder, A. W. Easley, C. W. Smith and Bob Remeur; and (back row) Bob Verhage, Bert Davis, Leo Wolfe, Roy Fitzgerald, James Spalding, Joe Miller, B. Holly, Leo Rychel, R. Townsend, C. J. Beckwith, Elmer Worsham, R. Bushouse, John Munther, Art Holt, M. Belden and H. C. Baker.





Overcoming Down Period With Mill Jobs And A Strike

With the completion of most Upjohn projects, employment slowed considerably for Local 131 before the end of 1950, by which time several brothers were working with locals in other cities. The remodeling of the pharmaceutical company's downtown headquarters did provide some jobs for the local, but for the first time in some time, "one or two at a time are occupying the bench," **Press Secretary Floyd Putnam** reported in the November 1951 *Journal*.

The local and Kalamazoo, in general, were greatly hindered at the time by a shortage of construction materials, which was holding up multiple projects. Brother Putnam even declared in the December 1951 *Journal*, "There seems to be a reasonable amount of work in the immediate future but it is held up by the lack of the necessary material and the restrictions

on that which is available." In particular, the city had \$3-million-worth of new school construction that was waiting to get underway or to be continued, and work on several powerhouses that had been started was stalled.



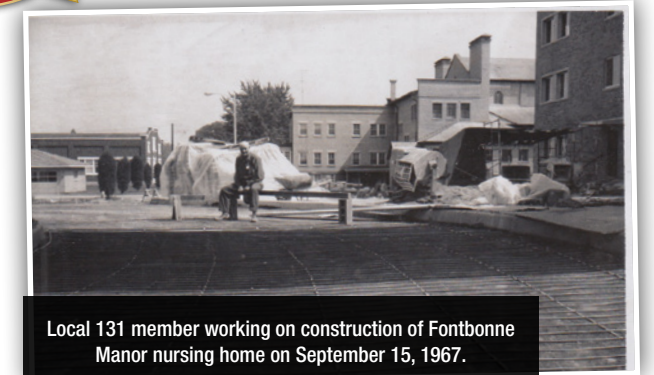
Local 131 25-year members and guests at a dinner given in their honor on April 18, 1952: (front row, left to right) I.B.E.W. International Representative F. M. Harris, contractor Burr Wheeler, Harley McDaniel, Harry Oswald, Arthur Hyde and O. Bruce Brown; and (back row) Clarence DePlanche, Howard Baker, Merritt Fisher, contractor Clarence "Slim" Leyen, Oshtemo fire chief Hilliard Clapp, Alvin Routsong and Lavinus "Vine" Verhage.

While the situation persisted into late 1952, the local in May of that year was able to negotiate a new contract with the Electrical Contractors Association for an increase in wages of 14 cents per hour. Once the agreement was approved by the Construction Industry Stabilization Commission, the new pay rate for journeymen was \$2.80 per hour effective June 2.

Brother Putnam was also able to announce in the August 1952 *Journal* that the local and other I.B.E.W. locals were working to create a statewide plan for insurance benefits.

By 1954, Local 131 was 208 members strong, each of whom had a \$1,000 life insurance policy available to him through the union and a \$50-per-month pension. That year, the local gained another new, one-year contract that raised its journeymen's pay scale to \$3 per hour beginning December 10.

Throughout the remainder of the decade, many of the local's members would work on



Local 131 member working on construction of Fontbonne Manor nursing home on September 15, 1967.



Local 131 member Burr Wheeler (far right) is honored for his 50 years of service to the I.B.E.W. during a membership meeting on July 21, 1969. Also pictured are (left to right) Hayes Whisler, 51-year member Howard Baker, 51-year member Harley McDaniel and Hilliard Clapp.

Electrical crew working for Rowen & Blair at construction of the General Motors plant in Kalamazoo in 1966.





expanding and building new paper mills in the area, including those for the **Menasha** and **KVP (Kalamazoo Vegetable Parchment)** paper companies. **Nazareth College** in Kalamazoo in the mid-1950s also began a \$7 million development project that would last through the 1960s and employ numerous Local 131 members. (The college would close in 1992.)

What's more, the local's condition continued to improve all over, prompting Brother Putnam to proclaim in the October 1957 *Journal*, "No one is on the bench at this time and the outlook seems brighter by the minute."

While members were helping to build additional projects such as a **Continental Can Company** facility at Three Rivers, Michigan, by the following year, the local's employer-funded vacation plan was also in operation – and members were taking vacations "that were a thing unheard of a few years ago," the press secretary commented in the February 1958 *Journal*. The local's medical and hospitalization plan by then was also being paid for by contractors and a new contract effective May 1 raised hourly wages to \$3.40, giving Brother Putnam more reason to declare:

"Ours is not the worst lot in the labor field, and with few exceptions, 1957 was not too bad a year even if we did not make a million bucks – we had fun trying."

The local was forced to strike in May 1959 for several days before its 22 individual contractors would each sign new agreements. The contracts provided 17-cent raises for the local's 165 electricians, bumping their pay to \$3.85 per hour and returning them to their jobs.

Surging As Construction Across Jurisdiction Soars

Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, Upjohn would dramatically expand its research, manufacturing and administrative

facilities in and around Kalamazoo. During those decades, the company essentially employed half of the Local 131 membership at times for its numerous construction projects.

Perhaps just as vital to the local and the city at the time, **General Motors** built a 2-million-square-foot **Fisher Body stamping plant** in Comstock Township in east Kalamazoo County, which opened in 1966. Nearly every member of Local 131 was employed on construction of the plant, which at its peak employed nearly 4,000 skilled laborers. (In 1992, *General Motors* announced the closing of the facility.)

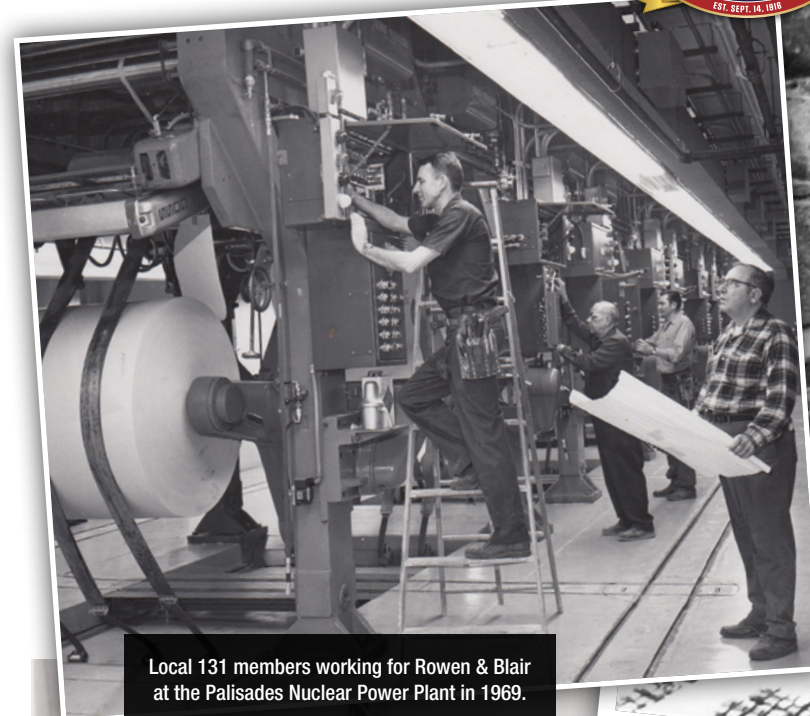
The local began "The Sixties" with a new agreement with the Kalamazoo Electrical Contractors Association that not only raised journeymen's pay rate to \$3.70 per hour, but also paid 18 cents per hour into the local's Vacation Fund. On July 18, the local negotiated a 1-cent increase in the hourly rate to its Insurance Fund, increasing that contribution to 9 cents per hour.

Then the City of Kalamazoo experienced an unprecedented construction boom that would last through the decade, highlighted early on by the new, 118-unit Kalamazoo Hotel, built downtown in 1961 with Local 131 electrical workers.

During the first nine months of 1963 alone, more than \$21 million in new construction was started in the city, an increase of 40 percent over the same period a year before – a trend that would repeat itself in the coming years.

With Local 131's 250 members being kept busy, **Business Manager O. John Whisler** told the February 11, 1968, *Gazette*, "From here on, the openings are going to continue to be there."

Local 131 established its own **Pension Plan** with employer contributions in 1972.



Local 131 members working for Rowen & Blair at the Palisades Nuclear Power Plant in 1969.



Palisades Nuclear Power Plant



Local 131 crew working at the Palisades Nuclear Power Plant in 1969.



A year later, the local was working on millions of dollars' worth of construction in its jurisdiction alone, including jobs on the campus of regular-employer **Western Michigan University**, at Borgess and Bronson hospitals, at the Episcopal Cathedral in town, at Consumers' Ludington Pumped Storage Power Plant on Lake Michigan and on the **Kalamazoo Valley Community College** campus. "Work is good in Local 131," Press

I.B.E.W. Local No. 1295, the radio-television broadcast local of Grand Rapids that was chartered on December 19, 1941, was amalgamated with Local 131 on August 1, 1972.

Secretary Rolla Williams broadcast in the February 1969 *Journal*.

Most certainly, during the second half of the decade, multiple building projects at Western Michigan University and Kalamazoo College provided employment to Local 131 members. At Western Michigan, its \$25 million worth of construction included a \$2 million health-services building, a \$2 million student-services building, a \$4.5 million addition to **McCracken Hall** sciences facility, a new \$8 million physical-sciences building and the \$6.5 million Instructional Facility No. 1.

At Kalamazoo College, construction included a new \$1.5 million student center/dining hall, two new men's residence halls, the new **Upjohn Library** and the new **Light Fine Arts Building**. But Local 131 also staged one of the

few labor protests in its history at that time, as members picketed one of the projects at the school that was employing non-union workers.

By June 1969, approximately 375 I.B.E.W. electrical workers were working in the local's jurisdiction. Many of those men completed the \$1.25 million **Cathedral of Christ the King** for the Episcopal Diocese of Western Michigan and the **world's first electrically powered and controlled, hydraulically operated rolling-leaf bascule bridge** at South Haven, Michigan.

Local 131 members were also working on the **Palisades Nuclear Generating Station** during the late 1960s into the early 1970s. The nuclear power plant, located on Lake Michigan in Covert Township, Michigan, began producing electricity on December 31, 1971.

Back Down To Earth As Usual Adversary Persists

"I must apologize to my local Brothers. When I wrote my last article for the Journal, the bench was clear. By the time it appeared in print, there were between 50 and 60 Brothers on the bench."



Local 131 contract signing, June 18, 1974.



And so much of the 1970s would go for Local 131 – as **Press Secretary Wesley Cramer** unwittingly prognosticated in the June 1972 *Journal*, with periods of intermittent peaks and valleys of employment.

After a lull during which several members traveled to other locals, the local was busy as the decade dawned, with about 100 men working at the peak of construction on the new **Maple Hill Mall**. Many other members were employed on a new high school, and more projects were scheduled for the immediate future in the local's jurisdiction.

Operation Breakthrough, a low-cost housing development, was also underway by mid-1971. Local 131 members working for Christensen Electric of Kalamazoo were wiring the buildings, including a four-story high rise with 52 apartments.

But the "work problem," as Brother Cramer labeled it in his January 1972 *Journal* column, persisted. "Nobody is off too long, but the bench stays about the same, from two to eight men most of the time," he reported. However, construction of a new, \$18 million **Campbell Soup** factory in Glenn, Michigan, in 1972, as well as a new, \$8 million county jail and three new \$3 million schools, buoyed the local that year and into 1973.

Meanwhile, the local's membership and trade jurisdiction grew when the I.B.E.W. merged **Local No. 1295** of Grand Rapids, Michigan, into Local 131 on August 1, 1972. With the amalgamation, the local began representing **radio and television broadcast** workers (a classification it retains as it marks its 110th charter anniversary in 2026).

The historic nationwide recession of 1973-1975 brought the local's employment to a near-screaming halt, as high unemployment and inflation (labeled "stagflation") seized the country. For much of the duration of the economic crisis, work in the area was slow and

Local Gives Back to Its Community

Local 131 has a long and proud tradition of community service dating back to the very beginning of the local. At 110 years old in 2026, the local's membership continues to donate personal time, resources and talents to community organizations such as the Boy Scouts, Habitat for Humanity, 4-H, Safe Kids Coalition, March of Dimes, Toys for Tots, the area food pantry **Twelve Baskets** and numerous youth sports groups, while the Local 131 golf outing has become a standing tradition that raises funds for various charities since the local's 100 year anniversary in 2016.

Looking back, the charitable efforts are far too numerous to count. They have ranged from installing electric wiring in the homes of 16 Potawatomi Indian families during Christmastime in December 1967 to beginning an annual Red Cross blood drive in 1975, and from helping renovate an old building for the Kalamazoo County Emergency Overnight Shelter for the Homeless in 1988 to about 30 members voluntarily assisting with cleanup efforts and electrical-service repair in Three Rivers, Michigan, after a tornado struck the town on March 6, 2026.

Also recently, the local's Veteran's Committee helped clean a veterans' living facility, and it began an annual flag-planting tradition at **Fort Custer National Cemetery** on Memorial Day. The local's younger members likewise have answered the call recently, as the local adopted a **RENEW (Reach Out and Engage Next-Generation Electrical Workers)** Scholarship program in which participants earn credits by volunteering and participating in local events, with each credit going toward paying tuition as the union matches the funds raised.



Local 131 members at a Habitat for Humanity project.



Local 131 members Ron Williams and Dick Carson at work at the Argenta substation on June 4, 1974.



employment was poor for the local, and up to 100 men at a time were on the out-of-work bench periodically through 1975.

“No good news to write,” Brother Cramer reiterated in the January 1974 *Journal*. “Work is slow as usual,” he then essentially repeated in February and in many of his ensuing letters.

A respite came in the spring of 1976 when construction picked up in Kalamazoo. By June, not only were all of the local’s men working but there were “quite a few” traveling brothers in the jurisdiction as well.

However, an old nemesis continued to harass Local 131 – which was forced that spring to picket a local college that had hired a non-union contractor to build its new theater. Then with 100 men out of work (although partially because of the weather) in early 1977, Brother Cramer was left to report in the May 1977 *Journal*, “The non-union shops are still causing a problem in the area. Many jobs are going to the non-union shops, who in turn are working on sites with other union building tradesmen.”

Counterpunching Again With Encouraging Results

While work in Local 131’s jurisdiction started slowly in the 1980s, members had the opportunity to travel to Battle Creek and work with Local 445 in the **Kellogg**

Company cereal- and food-production plants and facilities, which were regular employers of Local 131 manpower through the years. Also, there would be a good amount of work going on at Western Michigan University.

Meanwhile, the local settled a contract agreement for June 1, 1981, that called for a journeyman wage of \$15.16 per hour, a health-and-welfare contribution of 85 cents per hour and a pension contribution of 6 percent of weekly wages by the employers.

To help gain more work, the local put up picket lines on various jobs in its area that summer. On numerous occasions, the local forced contractors to pay fair wages or sign union contracts – although the actions failed on one particular job, a new credit union building for General Motors employees.

But towards the end of the year and into the next, work was good for the local, primarily because of a shutdown at the Palisades Nuclear Plant for refueling and modifications. The local had about 250 journeyman wiremen employed on the job, including travelers.

Then in 1985, Menasha Corporation shut down its plant in Otsego, the final phase of a \$25 million renovation project that involved reworking all of the facility’s electrical and energy systems. Local 131 members were part of that final, \$5 million project to upgrade paper machine No. 1, affectionately known as “**Big Mo,**” that would increase the machine’s production capacity to 2,500 square feet per minute, a boost of 1,000 square feet.

By the mid-1980s, however, Local 131 was facing some very difficult times once again as the Palisades project was cut short and renovations to downtown Upjohn facilities were postponed – and non-union contractors continued to creep into Kalamazoo. With the employment situation slowed, many of the local’s members were traveling for jobs – some even working on the Alaska oil pipeline.

As the work situation remained bleak, with 40 percent of the local out of work in spring 1986, some relief came beginning in 1987 with the construction of an Upjohn office complex in Portage officially referred to as **Building No. 298** (unofficially called the “Glass Palace”). Dedicated on August 24, 1989, the \$49 million structure was built to hold 700 employees.

With employment still shaky, the local took matters into its own hands beginning in 1986 and developed and implemented a job-targeting **Market Recovery Program**, to which the membership contributed more than \$200,000 by July 1987. The effort would help subsidize work for projects on which the local’s contractors bid, thereby gaining more employment for members.

But International Sixth District Vice President James P. Conway wrote to Local 131 and Local 445 on July 16, 1987, expressing “great concern” over “the increasing growth of the non-union electrical contractor in your local’s jurisdictions.” He then informed the locals that he was assigning a representative to assist them in “jointly selecting and appointing an organizer to work with both local unions,” and suggested that the Kalamazoo local pay for 60 percent of the organizer’s costs.

While Local 131 **Business Manager Richard Redford** and his fellow officers protested the order, Brother Conway denied the local’s request to retract the directive. “The encroachment of the non-union worker in the western half of Michigan is a most serious threat to your future well-being,” the vice president wrote in an August 7, 1987, response to the local.

Local 131 **Sister Susie Burroughs** was the first female to graduate from the local’s apprentice-training program when she completed her apprenticeship in 1983. **Sister Betsy Rice** was the first female retiree of the local when she retired in 2000.

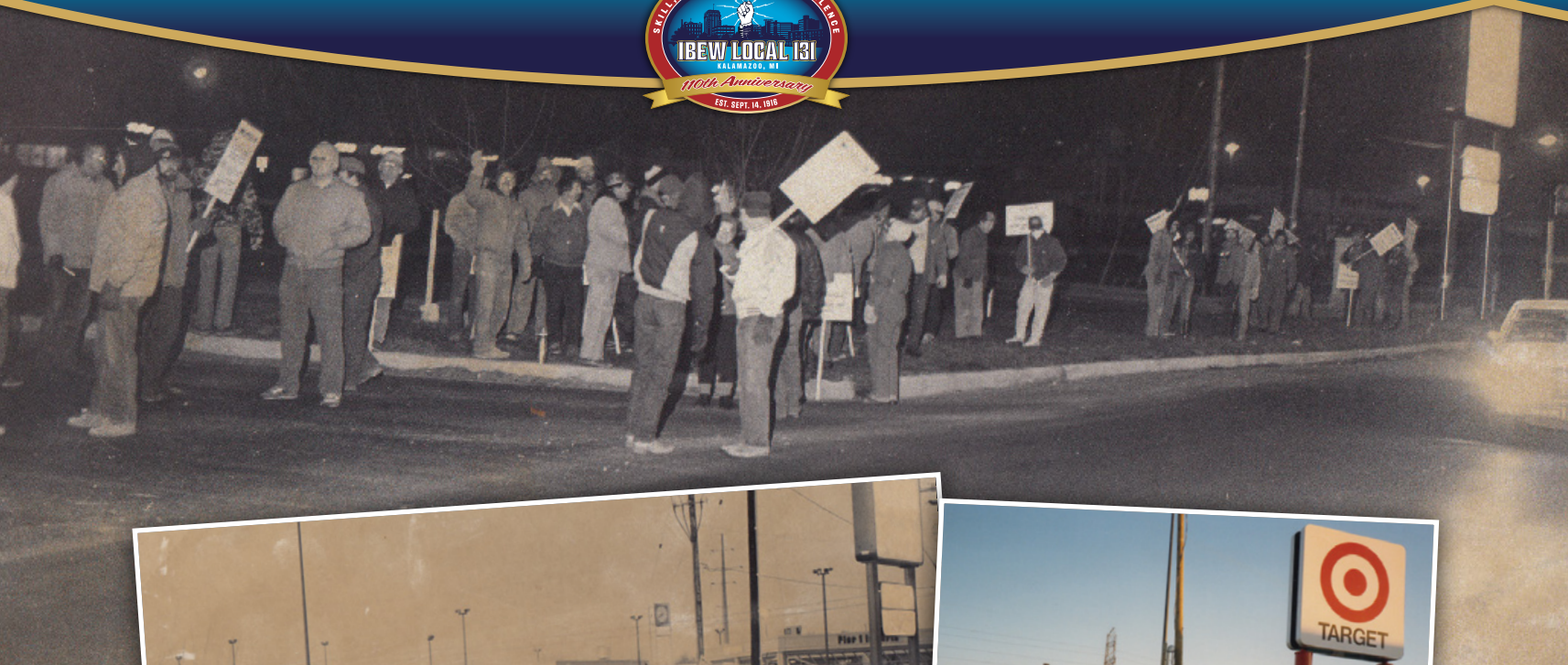
The subsequent push in organizing was further enhanced in 1988 when the local adopted the **Residential classification** to open opportunities in the home-construction market. Beginning that summer, work would remain “excellent” for the coming year, **Press Secretary Vickie L. Wright** reported in the September 1988 *Journal*.

Additionally, organizing efforts were beginning to pay dividends. Case in point, that summer, Kalamazoo Electric became a signatory contractor to Local 131, and 11 of its residential-wireman employees were accepted into the union.

However, the erratic decade took another turn in 1989 when several of the jobs the local had anticipated manning went to unfair contractors, leaving many of the local’s members out of work again as the end of



Local 131 members and other Michigan I.B.E.W. brothers attend the School for Workers in 1985.



Local 131 pickets the construction site of a new Target store on South Westnedge Avenue in Kalamazoo in April 1989 to protest the use of out-of-town, non-union labor. "All we're trying to do is get the public support against letting all this work go out of town," Business Manager Rodney Laversee said in the January 27, 1989, *Gazette*. "I would like the people of Kalamazoo and Portage to understand that a lot of this work should be done with local people and it's not being done."

the 1980s approached. Consequently, Sister Wright issued a warning – and an edict – in the September 1989 *Journal*:

"With the rats moving in at an alarming rate, we've an uphill battle to fight to turn the work situation around. We're trying several different tactics in hopes this might be achieved. It's everybody's problem, and our future is at stake."

Local 131 employed one such "tactic" beginning in 1989 when it joined I.B.E.W. **Local No. 107** of Grand Rapids and **Local No. 275** of Muskegon, Michigan (*both of which would be merged in 1996 as Local 275*) and Local 445 in an attempt to organize Windemuller Electric, one of the largest non-union electrical contractors in the state with 156 employees. In doing so, the locals commenced a "salting campaign," through which it had members work on a non-union job for Upjohn in order to organize workers there, that would continue with some success into 1991.

Putting Forth More Effort To Regain Its Jurisdiction

In that environment, work continued to decline into the early 1990s, when even construction of Building No. 300 for Upjohn in Kalamazoo only utilized one union contractor and three journeymen. But with the guidance of new **Organizer Al Moldovan**, the local grew to more than 450 members, who dug in and remained committed to their organizing and market-enhancement endeavors – which would soon produce substantial results.

By July 1991, every Local 131 member was working as its Market Recovery Program was in full operation, including placing informational advertisement spots on television. "Organizing is an ongoing process for us, and we're using every tool we have to educate the unorganized," Brother Moldovan announced in the *Journal* that month.

To that end, the local by that time was fully committed to the I.B.E.W. **Construction Organizing Membership Education Training (COMET)** program, an international effort to educate members on the most effective ways to organize workers into the union.

Before July 1992, the local won an election at Hershberger Electric to represent its 12-man shop. It also succeeded in obtaining six of the 12 jobs that its Industry Advancement Fund, which subsidized the marketing program, targeted: **Upjohn Building No. 335**, Domestic Linen Supply, the Congregation of Moses synagogue, Gilkey Elementary School, a 911 dispatch center and the Postal Federal Credit Union.

During that time, the journeyman base wage was raised to \$19.06 per hour, effective June 3, 1991. With that contract, the inside wiremen also received \$1.90 per hour into their Health Plan and \$2.36 (12.4 percent of income) into their Pension Plan. The next year, the wage was increased to \$19.71 per hour, and journeymen were earning a total of \$24.64 per hour.

As always, the local still continued to stave off attacks – and in 1992, it was an assault on prevailing wages. In particular, the local had to address problems with prevailing-wage language on work at Western Michigan University and at Borgess Hospital while also countering a bill in the state legislature to repeal prevailing wage, for which the notoriously anti-union Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) was strongly lobbying.

Regardless, Local 131 enjoyed full employment that summer and fall as its members also voted to increase their working dues to 4 percent to further finance the Industry Advancement Fund, which was showing continued promise. Through the program, the local had recently been successful in getting a job at **Pfizer Chemical** and a walkway lighting project at Western Michigan.

The Building Trades in southwest Michigan also received good news that fall from the Michigan Attorney General's office, which ruled that work done on the \$50 million **Gary Center** recreation center at Western Michigan would be paid at the prevailing wage rate. In early 1998, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled against the university from building the center without paying prevailing wages, while Michigan Attorney General Frank Kelly called the school's action "illegal."

Employment slowed again into 1993 – again as the result of the non-union element. "The non-union forces are not only undercutting our labor rates, they are also cutting each other's throats to obtain work," **Press Secretary Randy Williams** declared in the January 1993 *Journal*.

With 75 members on Book I looking for work early that year, some relief came in the Arcadia Creek Festival Place special-events-venue project and construction of a new Meijer store.

For the balance of the decade, Local 131 remained steady, with a \$15 million electrical project at Bronson Hospital beginning in 1998 boosting assurances of a positive future. The local's journeymen were also given a total wage and benefit package on August 1, 1999, of \$30.57 per hour and a raise of another \$1.17 on June 1, 2000.



Local 131 members at work on a project at Bronson Hospital in 1999.



The local still had to put up a strong fight during the final years of the decade, the century and the millennium. But with optimism now reigning, **Organizer Kenny Linn** was compelled to report in the November 1999 *Journal*:

"The local work picture is a little different from the rest of the state. We are holding our own and are able to organize on a continuing basis. Without the help of our membership, the changes needed to take our jurisdiction back wouldn't be happening."

Generating New Sources Of Work For Its Members

By the year 2000 and the new "Y2K" millennium, 80 percent of the Kalamazoo area's paper-processing industry – which a short time before consisted of more than 20 paper plants and was a major employer of Local 131 labor – was gone, as was almost all of the region's automotive-production capacity. Just that year, paper-products giant Georgia-Pacific Corporation, citing a weak market, closed the 133-year-old paper mill in the city that it had acquired in 1967.

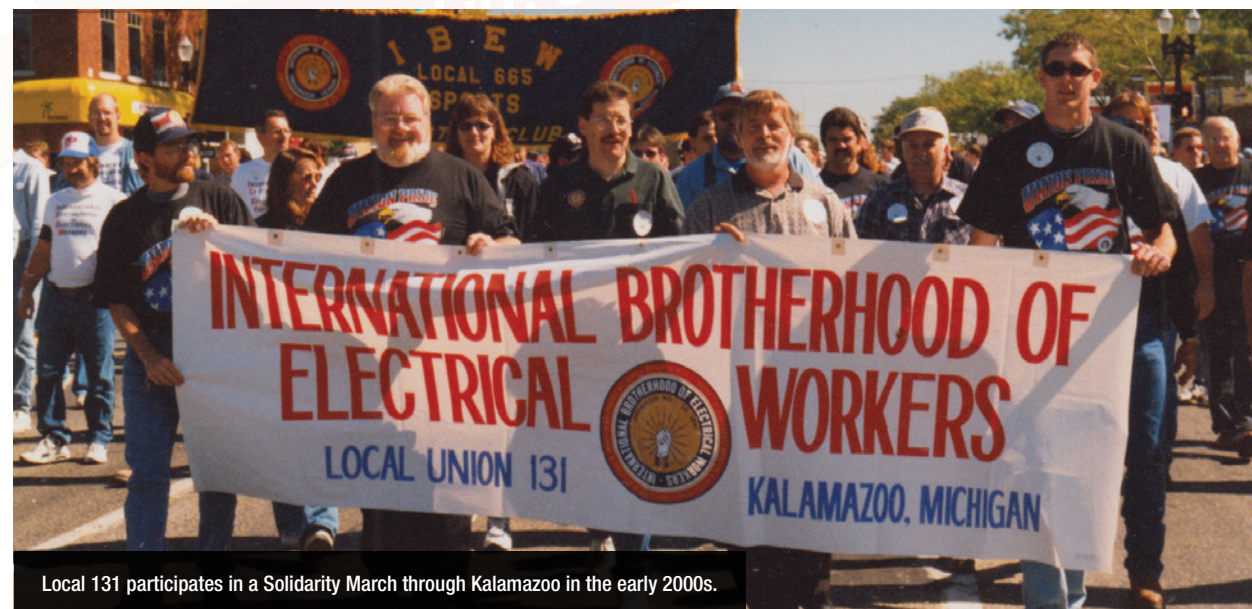
However, employment for Local 131 remained stable into 2000, by which time

Business Manager Donald Bloink had appointed a second organizer, **Brother Dave Parker**, to join **Organizer Matt Mizikar**.

After a brief lull during which 100 members were out of work at times during the first quarter of 2001, employment picked up in April when Palisades Nuclear Power Plant began a six-week refueling and maintenance outage. Local 131 members were some of the over 200 union tradesmen who replaced the facility's 30-year-old, original high-pressure steam turbine and generator rotor, increasing output of the 840-megawatt generator by up to 15 megawatts.

In September, some 55 members returned to the bench as the electrical work on a new co-generation power plant in Covert Township continued to wait. By June the next year, 95 members were on Book I awaiting jobs as the plant remained slow to "man up" while the main contract for the work had still not been awarded.

Once construction of the **Covert gas-fired power plant** got underway in the fall of 2002, the Local 131 work picture brightened and strong employment would continue into the following year. In fact, about 80 traveling



Local 131 participates in a Solidarity March through Kalamazoo in the early 2000s.



Training Members to Be The Best Electrical Workforce

During its early decades, like other building trades unions, Local 131 apprentice training was a very informal process. The 5- to 6-year apprenticeship essentially involved only hands-on education gained on the job while working with a journeyman electrical worker.

By the mid-1930s, Local 131 apprentice training was a more structured four-year program (through which 4thyear apprentices were paid 80 cents per hour in 1935) – but it still focused primarily on learning on the job.

However, the local and its contractors established the Kalamazoo Electrical Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee (K.J.A.T.C.) in 1946 to oversee and coordinate a formal training program that incorporated significant classroom instruction. The training was administered by Kalamazoo Public Schools (and would be for the next few decades), and by the mid-1960s consisted of 7,300 hours of on-the-job training and 670 hours in the classroom.

In 1986, the K.J.A.T.C. negotiated and implemented a five-year apprenticeship program. Local 131's training is now conducted by J.A.T.C. instructors in the local's own training

facility at its union hall – and as always, apprentices are paid during their apprenticeships.

In 1986, the K.J.A.T.C. negotiated and implemented a five-year apprenticeship program. Local 131's training has since been conducted by J.A.T.C. instructors in the local's own training facility at its union hall. As always, apprentices are paid during their apprenticeships for the work they perform while receiving on-the-job training.

To further enhance their ability to train apprentices and provide members with continuing education, the local and the J.A.T.C. opened a new Training Facility in Schoolcraft, Michigan. A work in progress, the new facility features hands-on labs for craft certification testing.

The apprentice-training program has also been condensed recently from 5 years to 4 years. With work in the Local 131 jurisdiction surging the J.A.T.C. has enrolled between 120 and 150 apprentices for most of the previous five years, whereas 10 years ago enrollment number was closer to 80 students per year.





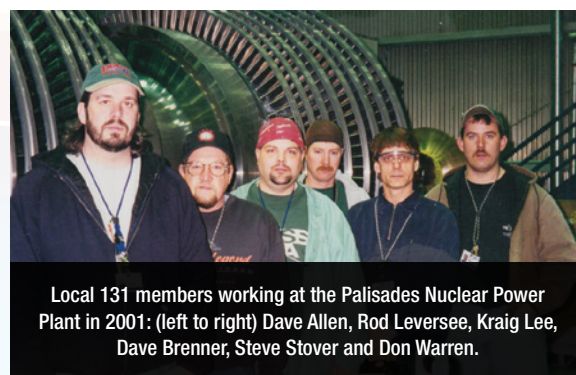
I.B.E.W. brothers were working at the facility for Newkirk Electric at one point. What's more, that spring the local started work on three new school projects in the Kalamazoo school district.

As the local approached its 100th anniversary in 2016, it continued to work on many of the major projects in Kalamazoo and throughout its jurisdiction, and its nearly 400 members were kept busy applying their skills and commitment to helping southwestern Michigan grow. Notably, expansion of the over-burdened national and local power grid beginning in the mid-2000s involved the journeymen and apprentices of Local 131.

Other projects on which members worked in and around the local's centennial year included the **Western Michigan School of Culinary Arts** and jobs at Palisades Power Plant and global companies such as Ross Labs, Welch Food (Welch's), Pfizer (which owns what remains of Upjohn) and Zoetis. What's more, the local turned a focus back to commercial work, especially in the downtown area, beginning in the mid-2000s; specifically, it gained a great deal of employment from the relative flood of new **micro-breweries** in Kalamazoo. *(Not only is the city home to the state's oldest micro-brewery, Bell's Brewery, but in 2013, Business Insider named Kalamazoo as the No. 3 "Beer Town in America" and that year alone six new breweries opened in the city.)*



Local 131 members work on the Edison Street lighting project in 2009.



Local 131 members working at the Palisades Nuclear Power Plant in 2001: (left to right) Dave Allen, Rod Leversee, Kraig Lee, Dave Brenner, Steve Stover and Don Warren.

Construction of the **Gun Lake Casino** in 2009 was yet another landmark edifice in the region built with Local 131 craftworkers. After the local and union labor supported efforts of the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band of Pottawatomi Indians (also commonly known as the "Gun Lake Tribe") beginning as early as 2002 to secure a gaming license to build the casino in Allegan County, including making phone calls to legislators to voice support for casino legislation, the grateful Native Americans built their casino using an all-union workforce.

Local 131 members would then also help build the Potawatomi-owned **Four Winds Hartford** casino in Hartford, Michigan, beginning in late 2010. Just 14 months after construction began as workers including union electricians held to a fast-track schedule, a grand opening for the 52,000-square-foot gaming facility would be held on August 30, 2011.

One of its crown-jewel projects that the local also powered during that time was the **Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine**, the university's first medical school. With ground broken for the facility on October 12, 2012, the \$68 million renovation and addition project for the eight-story building located at 300 Portage Street in downtown Kalamazoo became the centerpiece of the **W.E. Upjohn M.D. Campus** once completed in June 2014, after which an additional \$10 million renovation of



Western Michigan University School of Medicine, 2014

two floors for laboratory research was completed in early 2016.

Meanwhile, as Local 131 also began to embrace **renewable energy** and the work it could provide, its members were being prepared to build and install solar and wind renewable-energy projects. One such job was the 1-megawatt solar-power plant for Western Michigan University built by Consumers Energy and opened on September 16, 2016, after the local's members installed the 8.5-acre array of more than 4,000 solar panels on the university's campus, which could produce enough electricity for 200 Michigan homes and businesses.

That year – during which Local 131 marked its **100th charter anniversary** with a dinner/dance on October 1, 2016, at the Radisson Plaza Hotel in Kalamazoo – and throughout the



Local 131 members help build the Gun Lake Casino in 2009: (top photo) Jeff Paam, (middle photo) Mike Tiller and (bottom photo) Scott Flower.

balance of the decade employment conditions for the local's members remained strong. Among key projects on which the union electricians worked during that time was construction of a major, \$76-million expansion to the Gun Lake Casino in 2016 for the Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band, whose projects would continue to employ hundreds of Local 131 wiremen over the following decade.



The Local 131 union hall, offices and training center at 3641 East Cork Street in Kalamazoo, 2016.



In Aftermath Of Tragedy, Going Strong To Year 110

The worldwide coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that struck the United States in early 2020, after which it would claim the lives of more than 1 million Americans over the next three years, disrupted Local 131's promising strong conditions as it slowed construction work throughout Michigan and the country. Internally, the local took measures to help stop the spread of the virus and keep its members and staff safe, including implementing social distancing and face-covering mandates and canceling meetings and training sessions.

Although the pandemic continued to disrupt our lives and daily business, many members remained on jobs that officials deemed "essential," allowing those electrical workers to gain workhours. As such, **Business Manager Brian O'Donnell** was able to announce in both July 2020 issues of the bi-weekly *Building Tradesman* publication of the Michigan Building and Construction Trades Council, "The work outlook is strong. We expect to have a busier than normal summer continuing into the winter."

The local's members would wire the transformation of the Pfizer Kalamazoo manufacturing plant in Portage, Michigan, in which the international pharmaceutical company would produce vaccines to combat COVID under its **Pfizer Project Lightspeed**. Nearly 400-million doses of the drugmaker's vaccine would ultimately be administered in the United States alone after the union wiremen were kept busy on the job in 2020 and 2021 while much of the country was shut down.

Key to "Project Lightspeed" for the local and the Kalamazoo area, in a well-timed letter to Senator Gary Peters in the spring of 2020 when the project's site location was still undecided, Local 131 advocated for the vaccine to not only be made in the United States but in Portage. After the first shipments of the drug were shipped from the factory on December 13 of that year, Business Manager O'Donnell proclaimed in the July 16, 2021, *Building Tradesman*, "Our members are proud of the work they provided to help bring an end to the COVID-19 pandemic by working on biopharmaceutical facilities that discovered and developed the vaccine. The industry relies on the skills, training and work ethic of our

members from the first ground broken to wiring the labs."

Elsewhere as the pandemic lingered into 2021, more than 850 electricians from Kalamazoo and other I.B.E.W. locals wired the massive new Graphic Packaging International "Project Bronco" recycled paperboard manufacturing facility in Kalamazoo throughout 2021 and 2022 – the largest job in the history of Local 131. Construction of the \$600-million facility was said to be the highest paying job in the country at the time as the electricians worked around the clock with a \$150 per-diem incentive.

Significant to the success of the project were the contributions of about 130 I.B.E.W. "helpers," many of whom would become future apprentices and wiremen in the local. Additionally, while conditions often did not meet union standards, the pay kept wiremen coming to Kalamazoo from all over the country for nearly two years.

Meanwhile, in July 2021 the local's Negotiating Committee bargained a new work agreement with the **Kalamazoo Division of the Michigan Chapter NECA**, which represents the local's employing contractors, that the membership subsequently ratified. The three-year contract provided total wage-and-benefits package increases of 3.5 percent for the first year and 3 percent each for the second and third years.

Another Match-E-Be-Nash-She-Wish Band project then employed scores of Local 131 wiremen with construction of the **Wawyé Oasis** expansion at Gun Lake Casino beginning in May 2022. The focal point of a \$300-million "Phase 5" resort enlargement, the facility's 32,000-square-foot tropical glass atrium opened to the public in late May 2025, shortly after the accompanying 16-story luxury hotel tower opened that March. (*The Wawyé Oasis would go on to host the Local 131 110th anniversary celebration party in September 2026.*)



With a large amount of work in its jurisdiction, Local 131 enjoyed a busy 2023 out in the field that provided full employment among its membership for most of the year, during which the local gained 25 new members and several new signatory contractors. Steady work persisted into December as members worked on an array of jobs that included construction of a manufacturing facility for **Zoetis**, world's largest animal-health company, and the Pfizer **Modular Aseptic Processing (MAP)** project to upgrade its Portage site for future production, which employed more than 100 wiremen and apprentices before being halted because of public backlash to the COVID vaccine.

Then in 2024, a federal government/private industry collaboration re-commissioned the





Palisades Nuclear Generating Station just two years after it had been shut down in 2022, a \$1.5-billion preliminary project that would employ as many as 130 Local 131 members by 2026. Covered entirely by a labor-friendly project labor agreement with the I.B.E.W., including work on the small modular reactors proposed for the site that would be the nation's first, the initial investment is the precursor to an anticipated \$11-billion in financing for what will be the first nuclear plant to ever be restarted after decommissioning began.

The closure of Palisades had threatened to devastate southwest Michigan with irreplaceable economic losses after the region had lost most all of its industry over the previous few decades. Instead, while the pace of work on the project is slow at times and its bureaucracy frustrates supervision and workers alike, with \$15 over scale and a \$5 retention bonus the jobs have been filled at a time of unprecedented demand for inside wiremen.

Instead, with the work at Palisades, **Local 131 Business Manager Morris Applebey**, who took over the local's top administrative position in 2022, was able to report in the

December 13, 2024, *Building Tradesman* that the year was "remarkably busy" for the local. With other major projects such as construction of the **Blue Oval Battery Plant** in Marshall, Michigan, beginning that year that was not under Local 131 jurisdiction but eventually employing nearly 150 of its wiremen, its entire membership remained fully employed throughout the year.

What's more, the local gained a new (and its current) three-year work agreement with NECA in 2024, although negotiations were brought to a mediator. Ultimately, the local received wage-and-benefit package increases of 6 percent, 5.5 percent and 4 percent for each year of the contract, respectively, for a total pay increase of 15.5 percent.

The nuclear station and battery plant as well as other work in neighboring I.B.E.W. locals continued to provide strong employment for the Kalamazoo local's members into and throughout 2025 as well. Into 2026, the year in which the local would celebrate its 110th charter anniversary, conditions also remained steady for the local and its membership, especially at Palisades as additional "emerging



work" was created every time one of its new systems was activated.

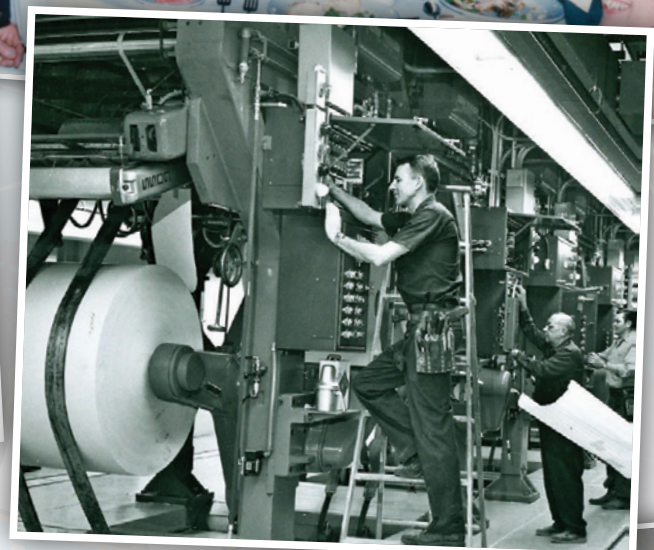
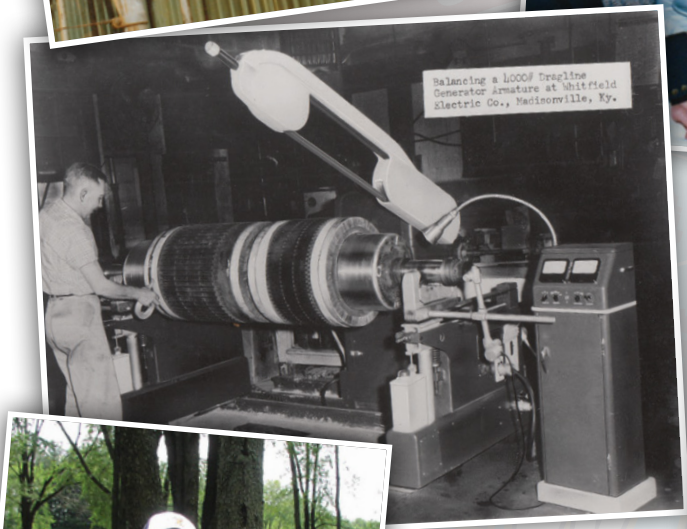
Crowning a five-year period of unprecedented growth, by September 2026, the month in which Local 131 would celebrate its 110th charter anniversary, its membership stood at approximately 600 wiremen – more than half of whom came into the local since 2021. As the local now looks to the future, it continues to honor its commitment to securing and protecting its future and that of its industry, those members and future, and the communities it powers, as it always has throughout 110 years of service. ■

"I think people fail to realize through history where (the labor movement) has come from. I think we should realize that people used to have to work seven days a week, as many as 16 hours a day. There were no pensions, no welfare plans, people were just low-paid sweat."

I.B.E.W. Local 131 Brother Rod Leversee
Business Manager, 1988 to 1992
 – *Kalamazoo Gazette*, September 5, 1989







Gold SPONSOR

POWERING KALAMAZOO

PROUDLY CELEBRATES

IBEW LOCAL 131'S 110TH

ANNIVERSARY PARTY



SEPTEMBER 12TH

ESTABLISHED

SEPTEMBER 14TH, 1916

110 YEARS OF POWERING OUR COMMUNITY
TOGETHER.



Walter Musumeci and  KCT Wealth Advisors

Salute all those who work to
build our community.

Thank you for your service!

KCT Wealth Advisors supports
Labor Unions and members with:

- 401(k) Advisory
- General Fund Investment
- Individual Financial Planning

For more information, please contact Walter at
www.kctwealthadvisors.com/contact or at (312) 419-1200

KCT Wealth Advisors is a division of Centennial Securities. Investments are not guaranteed and may lose value.

Silver SPONSOR

CONGRATULATIONS LOCAL 131 ON 110 YEARS OF SERVICE



Edward Jones

Silver SPONSOR

Even if you've retired, **your money still has to work.**



PROUD TO SUPPORT
THE IBEW LOCAL 131



You've come to expect a paycheck for years.
But what about after retirement? Let's
discuss your path to a predictable "paycheck"
of income after you're finished working.

Call or stop by.



Ginger M. Titus, CFP®, AAMS®
Financial Advisor
711 E Allegan Street
Otsego, MI 49078
269-694-1548

HAPPY 110TH 131!



Congratulations From Your Brothers & Sisters at 153.



CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL
THE BROTHERS & SISTERS OF
IBEW LOCAL 131 ON YOUR
110TH YEAR ANNIVERSARY



WARMEST WISHES FROM
THE OFFICERS, BROTHERS
& SISTERS, AND STAFF OF
IBEW LOCAL 58 DETROIT

KL/OPEIU42AFL-CIO

CONGRATULATIONS IBEW LOCAL 131 ON 110 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE!

**We Wish you Many More Years of
Success!**



From the Officers and Members
of IBEW LOCAL 82

UNION MEDIA™

A UNION HISTORIES™ STRATEGIC PARTNER

Services Exclusively for the

UNION CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY



BRANDING

VIDEO

WEBSITES

MARKETING

WWW.UNIONMEDIA.US



CWA
MEMBERS

DAUS

Financial Group

Helping IBEW 131 members in retirement since 2002

www.dausfinancial.co

IBEW LOCAL UNION 26



***Congratulations to IBEW Local 131 on your 110th Anniversary!
Have a wonderful celebration!
From the Officers and Members of IBEW Local Union 26.***

Building businesses, communities,
and careers for over 130 years!
Build it Right. Build it Union!



www.ibewlocal26.org · 301-459-2900
www.facebook.com/ibew26
4371 Parliament Place, Lanham, MD 20706

THE INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD OF ELECTRICAL WORKERS LOCAL UNION 252



RYAN HUSSE - BUSINESS MANAGER/FINANCIAL SECRETARY

Jeff Burdick – President/ Business Representative
Travis Stachlewitz - Vice President
Lisa Grove - Recording Secretary
Stacie Butler - Treasurer

Geoff Morning – Business Representative
Rick Plisko – Business Representative
James Johnson Jr. – Business Representative
Erik Kane – Business Representative
Dan Beck – Organizer

Executive Board
Dan Beck, Jake Church, Yohance Jennings, Dennis Locks,
Geoff Morning, and Erik Randall Jr.

Examining Board
Brian Ellison, Robert Laraway, and J. Randolph

Offices: 7920 Jackson Road, Suite A, Ann Arbor, MI 48103, (734) 424-0978
3101 Allied Drive, Jackson, MI 49202, (517) 783-2533

BUSINESS MANAGER
William W. Niesman

**ASSISTANT
BUSINESS MANAGERS**
John C. Burkard
John C. Dowling
Eric R. Bergdolld
Kevin B. Schuster
Thomas McCluskey

PRESIDENT
Todd Pierson

VICE PRESIDENT
Mike Martello

RECORDING SECRETARY
Thomas Fitzgerald

FINANCIAL SECRETARY
Bryan Nieciak



**FROM YOUR FRIENDS IN
I.B.E.W. Local 9**

7840 Graphics Drive, Suite 100
Tinley Park, IL 60477
(708) 449-9000
www.ibew9.org

TREASURER
Vince Bartlett
EXECUTIVE BOARD
Gary Pierson
Richard Peslak
Walter Kleinfeldt
John Russell
Michael Zalinski
Kevin Norris
Shawn Noon

EXAMINING BOARD
Mauricio Torres
Brian Rush
Jim Vinci
Thomas Shields
Vince Larsen



**Manulife**
Retirement

John Hancock

Congratulations

to the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 131. The Taft-Hartley team is proud to celebrate this milestone with you and your members.

Celebrating 110 years of skill, craftsmanship, and excellence

John Hancock Retirement Plan Services LLC, 200 Berkeley Street, Boston, MA 02116
John Hancock is not affiliated with International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 131, and neither is responsible for the liabilities of the others.
Manulife, Manulife Retirement, Stylized M Design, and Manulife Retirement & Stylized M Design are trademarks of The Manufacturers Life Insurance Company, and John Hancock and the Stylized John Hancock Design are trademarks of John Hancock Life Insurance Company (U.S.A.). Each are used by it and by its affiliates under license. NOT FDIC INSURED. MAY LOSE VALUE. NOT BANK GUARANTEED. © 2026 Manulife John Hancock. All rights reserved. FOR PLAN SPONSOR USE ONLY. NOT FOR USE WITH PLAN PARTICIPANTS.
S-IPS1593250-GE 8/26 1593250 RS0812265836646

CONGRATULATIONS LOCAL 131 ON 110 YEARS!



IBEW LOCAL 127



CONGRATULATIONS IBEW LOCAL 131 ON 110 YEARS!



Local 17

James A. Shaw

**BUSINESS MANAGER & FINANCIAL SECRETARY
LOCAL UNION NO. 17, IBEW**

(248) 423-4540

17000 W. 12 MILE
ROAD SOUTHFIELD, MI
48076

WWW.IBEWLOCAL17.ORG

Congratulations I.B.E.W. LOCAL 131 ON YOUR 110TH Anniversary!



Celebrating 110 years of excellence, dedication and brotherhood. Thank you for powering our communities and building a stronger future.

**MILLER COHEN, PLC**
JUSTICE FOR WORKING PEOPLE

Bruce Miller, Richard Mack, Robert Fetter, Keith Flynn,
Ryan Patee, Jeff DeLaunay, Yvonne Tirakian, Kathleen Kosman,
Amia Jackson, Michael Yaldo

Proud to Support IBEW LOCAL 131 ON THEIR 110TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION



**Thank you, Local 131,
for your continued brotherhood,
hard work and dedication.**

**IBEW LOCAL 306
AKRON, OHIO**



**IBEW LOCAL 445, BATTLE CREEK, MI
OFFICERS, MEMBERS & STAFF CONGRATULATE LOCAL 131 ON
THEIR 110TH ANNIVERSARY.**

Officers
*President- Jacob Westfall
Vice President- Derick Boyette
Recording Secretary- Wanda Secrest
Treasurer- Sam McFadden*

Executive Board
*Thomas Andalon
Derick Boyette
Jason Case
Matthew Farmer
Kevin Hagelgans
Jayson Mesecar
Dean Smith*

Office Staff
*Business Manager/FS- Lance Dougherty
Business Rep/Organizer- Travis Arney
Office Manager- Wanda Secrest*

Wishing you many years of continued success!



Thank You
TO OUR PLATINUM SPONSOR



Moore Electrical Service, Inc.