

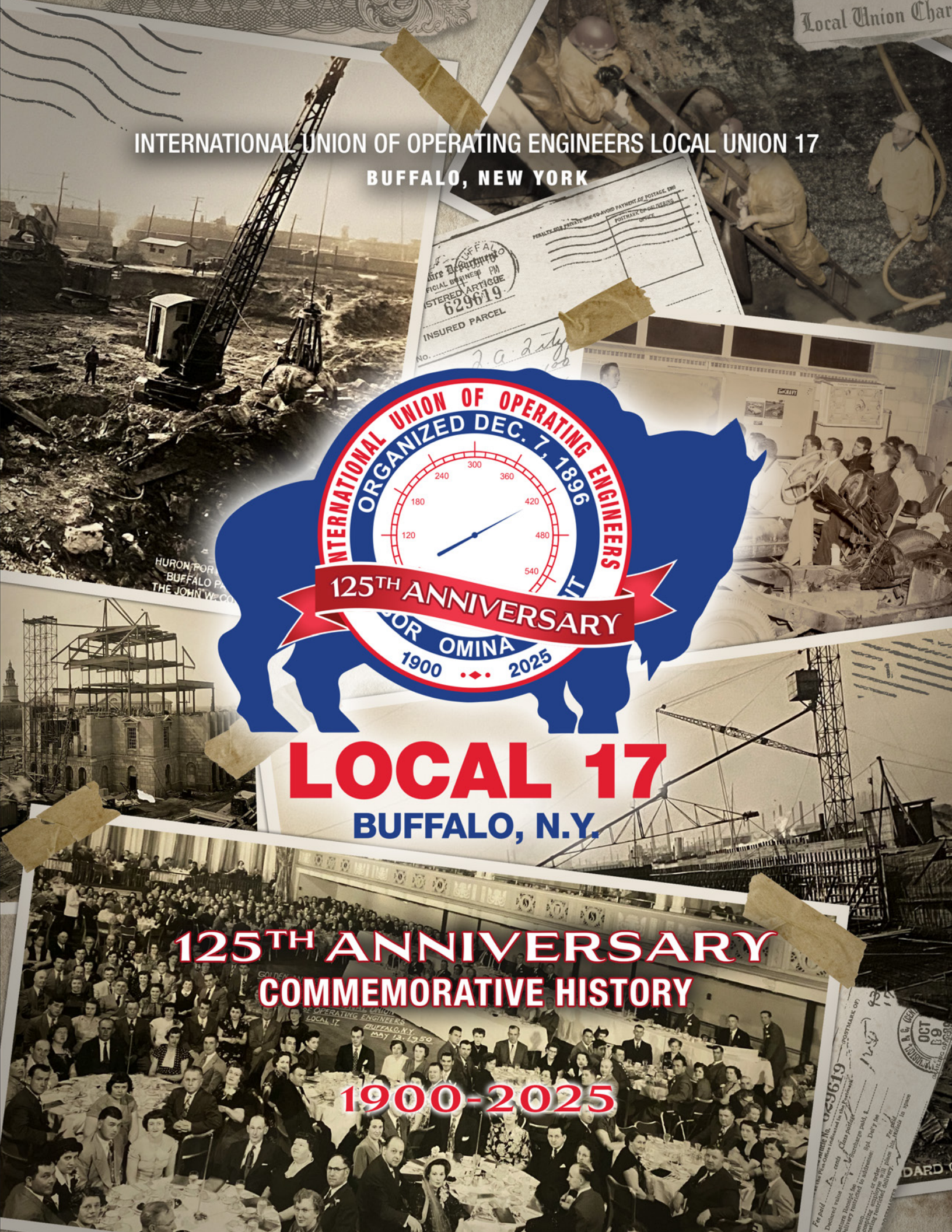
INTERNATIONAL UNION OF OPERATING ENGINEERS LOCAL UNION 17
BUFFALO, NEW YORK



LOCAL 17
BUFFALO, N.Y.

**125TH ANNIVERSARY
COMMEMORATIVE HISTORY**

1900-2025



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CONGRATULATIONS
**ON 125
YEARS**



The men and women of Local 17 have been an indispensable part of UCC's growth and success over the last 75 years. We are looking forward to decades of partnership to come!



**CONGRATULATIONS TO LOCAL 17
ON YOUR 125TH ANNIVERSARY!**



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**A LEADER IN HEAVY HIGHWAY AND BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION
ACROSS WESTERN NEW YORK.**

1995 2025



Operating Engineers Local No. 17

125-YEAR ANNIVERSARY DINNER/DANCE

Saturday, November 1, 2025

5:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Seneca Allegany Resort Event Center
777 Seneca Allegany Boulevard, Salamanca, New York

Registration and Cocktail Reception 5:00 - 6:00 p.m.

Seated Dinner, Presentations, Music & Dancing..... 6:00 - 10:00 p.m.

Music provided by The Corey Klawon Band



MEMBERS, TRAINING WILL CONTINUE TO SUSTAIN LOCAL 17

On January 11, 1900, a mere four years after the founding of the International Union of Steam Engineers, a forward-thinking group in Buffalo, New York, had the keen sense to make a gutsy move to better the working conditions for the industry – and soon after, Local 17 was chartered. It is with immense pride that we now celebrate Local 17's 125th anniversary as we enjoy its accomplishments.

Preparing for this celebration has allowed us the opportunity to review our history in depth. Obviously, Local 17's historical path has not always been the smoothest. This great organization has endured its share of peaks and valleys, all the while creating traditions that we all hold dear. In researching the past, we have been able to see a template emerge; a template to follow and modify as the situation dictates.

Local 17 has seen many administrations in one-and-a-quarter centuries. Some administrations were short-lived, others endured decades. Regardless of the leaders, regardless of the decade, the membership of Local 17 is the vehicle that has carried us to success. We should all be proud of the work we do and the manner in which we do it.

More than 50 years ago, another gutsy move was made to purchase a large piece of property that is now the Local 17 training site. This move allowed Local 17 to start a training program that is the envy of many. Throughout our history, there has been emphasis on being the best our craft can offer, and training is a huge component.

As we celebrate the past and look to the future, we will rely on the template forged in the hard work and dedication of our predecessors to guide us on our journey into the next 125 years. It is our privilege and honor to be custodians of this great organization in our window of time. It is our duty to leave it better than we found it. With the dedication and commitment of each and every member, we will continue to set the industry standards and command the best possible way-of-life for ourselves and those who follow.

I commend all of you for doing your part to achieve 125 proud years of existence. I challenge all of us to always look to the future and find ways to better ourselves and Local 17.

CONGRATULATIONS on 125 years. Stay committed, stay trained, stay the course and stay proud. Proud to be LOCAL 17!

Fraternally,

Bill Fekete

William Fekete, Business Manager
I.U.O.E. Local 17



This book was proudly produced by

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The 125-Year History of Operating Engineers Local No. 17 SOLIDARITY FOR WESTER

rating Engineers Local No. 17 & STRENGTH N NEW YORK



As the City of Buffalo, New York, transformed into a major industrial and transportation hub during the late 1800s, it rapidly grew into the eighth largest city in the United States in the 1890s. With its favorable location at the western terminus of the Great Lakes and the Erie Canal, the city's economy and, as a result, its construction industry were booming by that time.

In that setting, the recently formed National Union of Steam Engineers – forerunner of the International Union of Operating Engineers (I.U.O.E.) – which had organized on December 7, 1896, soon after organized engineers in Buffalo and chartered them as Local No. 17. The independent Stationary and Hoisting Engineers' Union No. 6649 of Buffalo voted in early- to mid-1898 to amalgamate into Local 17, creating a single union local of hoisting & portable engineers (who operate

heavy machinery on construction sites) and stationary engineers (who install and maintain fixed machinery such as boilers) for the city.

By late July 1899, by which time the national union had become the International Union of Steam Engineers (I.U.S.E.), Local 17 had about 100 members “in good standing.” To affirm the local's amicable condition, Local 17 **Recording Secretary William H. Allison** announced in a letter in the July 25 issue of *The Buffalo Times*, “No. 17 of the International Union of Steam Engineers is the only union of engineers in this city holding a national charter and with the American Federation of Labor.”

But the city's hoisting & portable and stationary members found it difficult to co-exist at that time, a precarious situation that was exacerbated by the presence of the new, independent Stationary and Hoisting

Continued after following spread.

International Nearly 129 Years Old PROGRESSION OF THE I.U.O.E.

With dreadful conditions plaguing the steam-engineering industry in the United States during the late 19th century, a single portable and 10 stationary engineers from across the country assembled in Chicago on December 7, 1896, to make plans for organizing all of the nation's steam engineers into a single, nationwide union. After those 11 men petitioned the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.) convention the following week for a national charter for a union of steam engineers, the group met again on December 18, 1896, to prepare the charter application and elect temporary officers, who were headed by **President Charles J. DeLong** of Chicago.

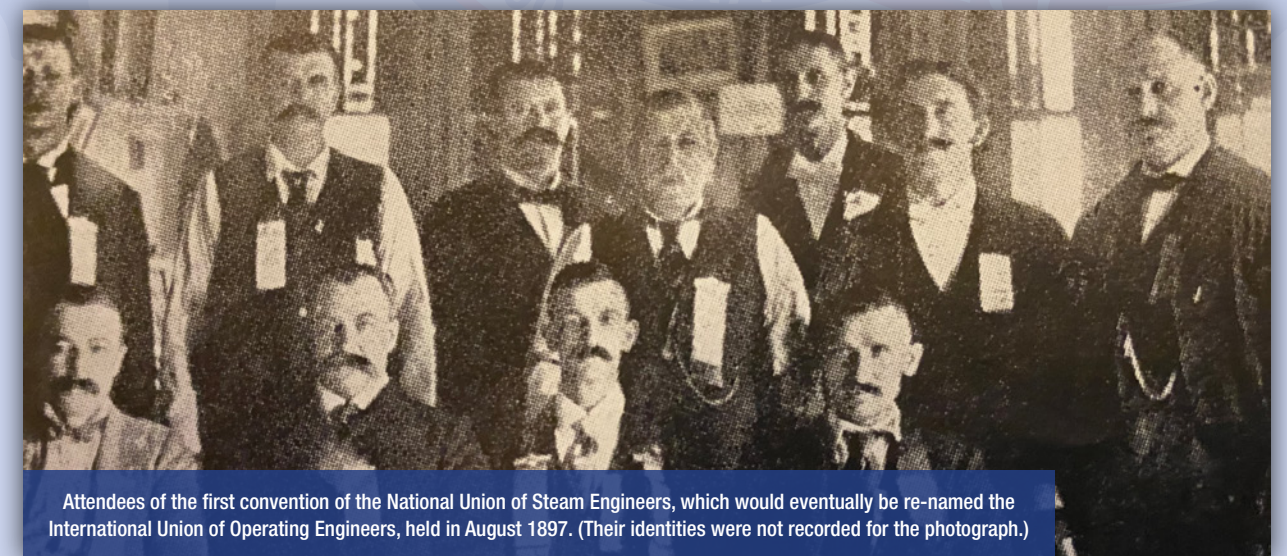
The A.F.L. would grant a charter to the **National Union of Steam Engineers** (N.U.S.E.) on May 7, 1897. (The common denominator among the three trades constituting the new engineers' union – portable, hoisting and stationary – was the steam engine; therefore, the name was chosen simply because steam was practically the only source of power at that time and was utilized almost exclusively by all of the union's membership.) The N.U.S.E. then held its first convention on August 9, 10 and 11, 1897, in St. Louis, during which the union chose its first elected officers, who were headed by **President Frank Bowker** of Boston.

Before the end of 1897, the first Canadian locals joined the union, prompting the union to change its name to the **International Union of Steam Engineers of America**. Shortly after, its General Executive Board shortened that to the **International Union of Steam Engineers**.

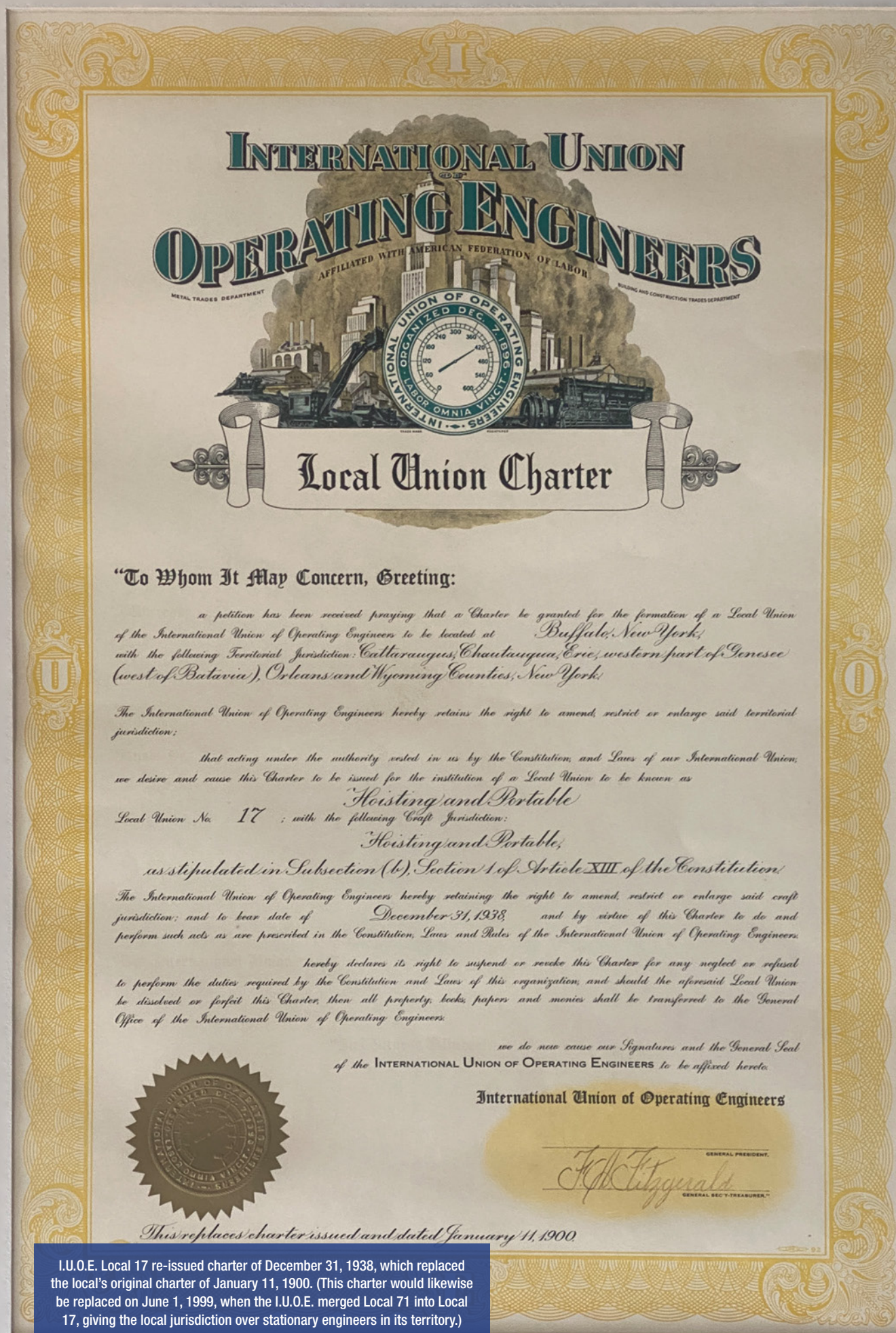
With the increase in the use of the internal-combustion engines and electric motors, hydraulic machinery and refrigerating systems, as well as steam boilers and engines, the types of work performed by the union's growing membership were changing as members' roles became more diverse and more construction workers came into the organization. Accordingly, during its 1912 convention, the union amended its name to the **International Union of Steam and Operating Engineers** – the "operating" added to the title as a catchall for operators of non-steam-powered machinery.

As advancements continued to alter most all of its industry and members were working almost exclusively with internal combustion engines, electric motors, hydraulic machinery and refrigerating systems, on July 1, 1928, the union dropped "steam" from its name and became the **International Union of Operating Engineers** (I.U.O.E.). What's more, as the organization progressed, it had attracted workers from the public sector, making it a truly diverse trade union.

In 2025, the I.U.O.E. remains a diversified trade organization that represents operating engineers working as heavy equipment operators, mechanics and surveyors in the construction industry, and stationary engineers who work in operations and maintenance in building and industrial complexes. The union also represents nurses and other health-industry workers, public employees in a wide variety of occupations, and a number of job classifications in the petrochemical industry.



Attendees of the first convention of the National Union of Steam Engineers, which would eventually be re-named the International Union of Operating Engineers, held in August 1897. (Their identities were not recorded for the photograph.)



I.U.O.E. Local 17 re-issued charter of December 31, 1938, which replaced the local's original charter of January 11, 1900. (This charter would likewise be replaced on June 1, 1999, when the I.U.O.E. merged Local 71 into Local 17, giving the local jurisdiction over stationary engineers in its territory.)



"To Whom It May Concern, Greeting:

"Whereas, a petition has been received praying that a Charter be granted for the formation of a Local Union of the International Union of Operating Engineers to be located at *Lakewood, New York* with the following Territorial Jurisdiction: *Cattaraugus, Chautauque, Erie, western part of Seneca (west of Batavia), Niagara, Orleans, and Wyoming Counties, New York.*

The International Union of Operating Engineers hereby retains the right to amend, restrict or enlarge said territorial jurisdiction:

"Know Ye, that acting under the authority vested in us by the Constitution and Laws of our International Union: we desire and cause this Charter to be issued for the institution of a Local Union to be known as

Mixed

Local Union No. *17* ; with the following Craft Jurisdiction:

Stationary and Hoisting & Portable as stipulated in Subsections (a) and (b) Section 1 of Article XIII of the Constitution

The International Union of Operating Engineers hereby retaining the right to amend, restrict or enlarge said craft jurisdiction; and to bear date of *May 1, 2019* and by virtue of this Charter to do and perform such acts as are prescribed in the Constitution, Laws and Rules of the International Union of Operating Engineers.

"The International Union hereby declares its right to suspend or revoke this Charter for any neglect or refusal to perform the duties required by the Constitution and Laws of this organization, and should the aforesaid Local Union be dissolved or forfeit this Charter, then all property, books, papers and monies shall be transferred to the General Office of the International Union of Operating Engineers.

"In Witness Whereof, we do now cause our Signatures and the General Seal of the INTERNATIONAL UNION OF OPERATING ENGINEERS to be affixed hereto.

International Union of Operating Engineers



This charter replaces charters issued and dated: January 11, 1900, December 31, 1933, June 1, 1999 and reflects the merger of Local 463 into Local 17.

I.U.O.E. Local 17 re-issued (and current) charter of May 1, 2019, which replaced the local's previous charter after I.U.O.E. Local 463 was merged into Local 17 and the local gained territorial jurisdiction over the former local's Niagara County.



Among members of the Joint Executive Board of I.U.O.E. locals in Western New York formed in 1912 was Local 17 officer Mark J. Cronin, who is standing second from right.

Engineers Local No. 1. Subsequently, the I.U.S.E. and the A.F.L. splitting Local 17 and the union chartered hoisting & portable **Local No. 17** – the official ascendant of the current-day Local 17 – on **January 11, 1900**, and later that month chartered stationary Local No. 32, with members of Local 1 being amalgamated into both locals.

"The controversy between International Steam Engineers Union 17 and Stationary and Hoisting Engineers Union 1 has been amicably settled after a conference between John Coleman, business agent for the United Trades and Labor Council, and Frank Morrison, secretary of the American Federation of Labor," *The Buffalo Commercial* newspaper ultimately reported on January 25, 1900. "Both unions will receive charters from the International Steam Engineers Union, and henceforth they will be known as Hoisting Engineers Union 17 and Stationary Engineers Union 32."

GROWING ALONG WITH ITS CITY

With Buffalo and its greater metropolitan area continuing to thrive and develop during the early stages of the new 20th century, by all accounts Local 17 and its hoisting & portable engineers likewise flourished in the first years and decades of the 1900s. Consequently, the local waged a successful strike against its employing contractors for eight days beginning May 1, 1903, winning a wage increase from \$18 to \$21 per week in a new work agreement.

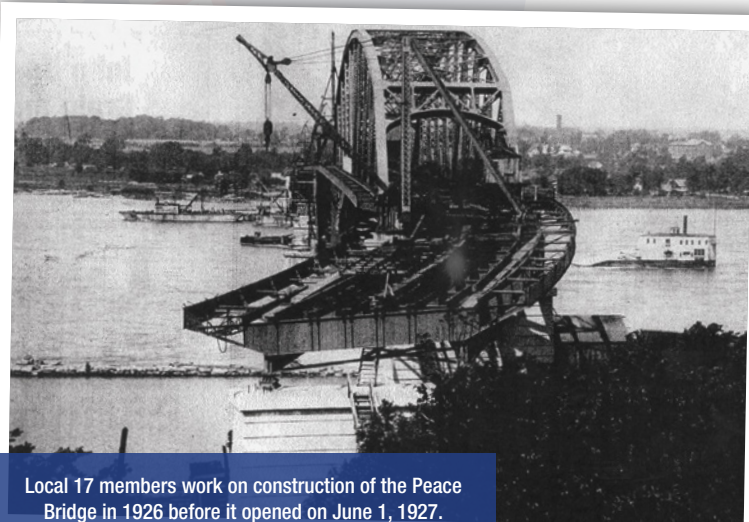
Only one employer, the Buffalo Dredging Company, refused to pay the new scale and also declared that it would only "employ the men by the month." However, in a display of the local's new-found strength, Local 17 **President John Cunningham** announced in the May 9 *Buffalo Enquirer* that "the union would not stand for that and thus favor any one company, and that the Buffalo Dredging Company would have to fall in line."

Out in the field during that period, the local's mechanics remained busy while the city's expanding prosperity generated abundant employment. Among many noteworthy projects the local's members helped build in the mid- and late-1900s was the large **Pierce-Arrow** administrative building and automobile factory in Buffalo, which served as the company's headquarters and production facility until 1938.

By 1918, Local 17 increased its journeyman mechanic's wage scale to \$40 per week and reduced their workweeks from 48 to 44 hours – both of which the local gained without having to strike. Also by that time, the local's membership had increased over the previous eight years from 90 to 160 mechanics and apprentices.

Even when some contractors in the city refused to employ the local's engineers as

non-union “open-shop” firms became more prevalent beginning in the late 1910s, the union was able to keep the local's members working. In one such instance in 1920, the re-named International Union of Steam and Operating Engineers (the direct predecessor of the I.U.O.E.) assisted the local with signing two out-of-town contractors that were



Local 17 members work on construction of the Peace Bridge in 1926 before it opened on June 1, 1927.



Local 17 operators place a beam during the early construction of the Peace Bridge between Buffalo and Canada in May 1924.

performing work in Buffalo, after which Local 17 **Recording Secretary William P. Dixon** declared in the June 1920 issue of *The Operating Engineer*, the union's monthly publication, “These jobs will cover a good long period, and our conditions according to our agreement warrant us one or more seasons of prosperous conditions. ... If we had the misfortune to have these jobs constructed under open shop conditions ... our Building Trades Department of the City of Buffalo would have one very long hard fight to keep their organization together.”

Out in the field during the early 1920s, jobs steadily employing the local's members included construction of the second, iconic **Hotel Statler** at Niagara Square. (After it was completed in 1923, the grand hotel would go on to host the likes of Elvis Presley before the building, now the mixed-use Statler Buffalo, was shuttered in 2008 and later sold.)

Local 17 members then began erecting the **Peace Bridge** to link Buffalo with Canada at Fort Erie, Ontario, over the Niagara River beginning in 1925. Working from the American side of the international crossing, the local's mechanics would place much of the 9,000 tons of structural steel used to build the bridge before it opened to the public on June 1, 1927.

Meanwhile, to continue protecting its jurisdiction the local struck an “unfair” contractor in 1925 that was using non-union labor on an elevator job located along the Buffalo lakefront. After the local deployed pickets on a daily basis on the road in front of the project for three weeks, it secured a signed agreement with the contractor, which previously had never employed union mechanics.

The local also assisted its stationary brothers in the city during that time when Local 32 and Local No. 460, the latter of which was organized in 1921 to represent city employees, both began to falter. In doing so, Local 17 helped organize a new stationary-engineers local in Buffalo that the International Union chartered



Local 17 operators erect the new Buffalo City Hall in August 1930 for its opening in November 1931.

as stationary **Local No. 907** in 1925, at which time the previous locals were disbanded and its members were taken into the new local.

The union steam and operating engineers of Buffalo remained vigilant in safeguarding its industry throughout the second half of the decade as well. For instance, while the city by 1926 had an ordinance “governing the examination of operating engineers and the inspection of steam boilers,” Local 17 and Local 907 collaborated to successfully have an amendment attached to those provisions that August that required any hoisting engineer to have a license from the city before “operating any hoisting machine or apparatus in connection with construction work or the erection of buildings.”

The local's organizing efforts continued to produce results, too. In one particular notable

Local 17 Branch Locals

Local 17-A

Junior and Apprentice Engineers

Originally chartered on June 6, 1927, with 14 member apprentices. In accordance with I.U.O.E. bylaws, the charter was re-issued on August 1, 1981, to cover "Junior and Assistant Engineers" when the local was issued a "Registered Apprentices" charter.

Local 17-B

Branch Engineers - Marine

Chartered on June 1, 1939, with eight members to cover "Marine" workers employed in the shipyards and docks of Buffalo and vicinity.

Local 17-C

Branch Engineers - Shop Mechanics

Chartered on September 6, 1955, with 50 members to cover "Shop Mechanics" working in equipment dealers' shops.

Local 17-D

Technical Engineers

Chartered in 2000 with Local No. 545-D member surveyors assigned to new "D" branch locals of I.U.O.E. locals throughout the state based on their home residence or jurisdiction of regular employment.

Local 17-RA

Registered Apprentice Engineers

Chartered on August 1, 1981, for "Apprentice" members.

Local 17-S

Stationary Engineers

Chartered on June 1, 1999, to represent "Stationary Engineers" with the merger of Stationary Local No. 71 into Local 17.

Local 17-G

Branch Engineers

Chartered on October 1, 2019, to represent member mechanics handling "Plastifusion and Natural Gas" work.

The I.U.O.E. chartered "branches" of its locals as a means of providing representation to apprentices and workers who are not operating engineers. Some locals of the International Union of Steam Engineers (one of the previous names of the I.U.O.E.) were already utilizing "subordinate" branch locals to organize firemen - or apprentices - who fired and maintained the engines of the machines being operated by journeyman engineers as early as 1906. Soon after, locals also formed branches for engineers performing lower-paying "street- and general-construction work."

Parent locals primarily organized branches early on in order to control the entry of potentially competitive workers into the union and, as a result, the wage scales of journeyman engineers. Ultimately, the union made its practice of utilizing branch locals official when it integrated measures for the system into its constitution during the early 1920s, by which time the branch-local system was essentially serving as a de-facto apprenticeship program.

example, the local in the spring of 1927 organized 10 engineers employed by the H. P. Burgard Company, which was one of the largest contractors in Buffalo and had been a non-union closed shop for the previous 25 years.

In order to better organize apprentices, the local then requested and received a branch charter from the International Union. Chartered on June 6, 1927, with 14 member apprentices branch "junior and apprentice engineers" **Local No. 17-A** provided representation for trainees the local would take into the union under its apprenticeship program to bolster its highly skilled workforce.

HISTORIC LOWS, WARTIME HIGHS

Local 17 and its hoisting & portable engineers would dominate the construction industry throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Bolstered during that period by work on some of the most iconic and vital infrastructure and institutional projects ever constructed in Western New York, the local would grow in size and stature as its mechanics made each of those jobs a reality.

First, however, throughout the 1930s, the local and the entire I.U.O.E. (which took on its current name in 1928) were critically slowed by the Great Depression, the worldwide financial and human catastrophe that began with the U.S. stock market crash of October 29, 1929 (history's "Black Tuesday") and lasted throughout the following decade. Affecting operating engineers particularly hard, membership in the International Union between July 1930 and July 1933 fell from 33,705 to 21,502, with hoisting & portable locals losing 54 percent and stationary locals shedding 23 percent of their respective members.

Local 17 members were initially kept employed on numerous projects that were underway, such as construction of the new **Buffalo Courier Express Building** in the city's Theater District in 1930, home of

the namesake newspaper, and the new (and current) 32-story **Buffalo City Hall** in 1930 and 1931. Expansion of the **University of Buffalo** also provided workhours for the local's mechanics, most notably on construction of the new **Crosby Hall** for the School of Business Administration, which was completed in June 1931; **Norton Hall** (now Harriman Hall) for the School of Education, which was completed in April 1933; and **Lockwood Library**, which opened in May 1935.

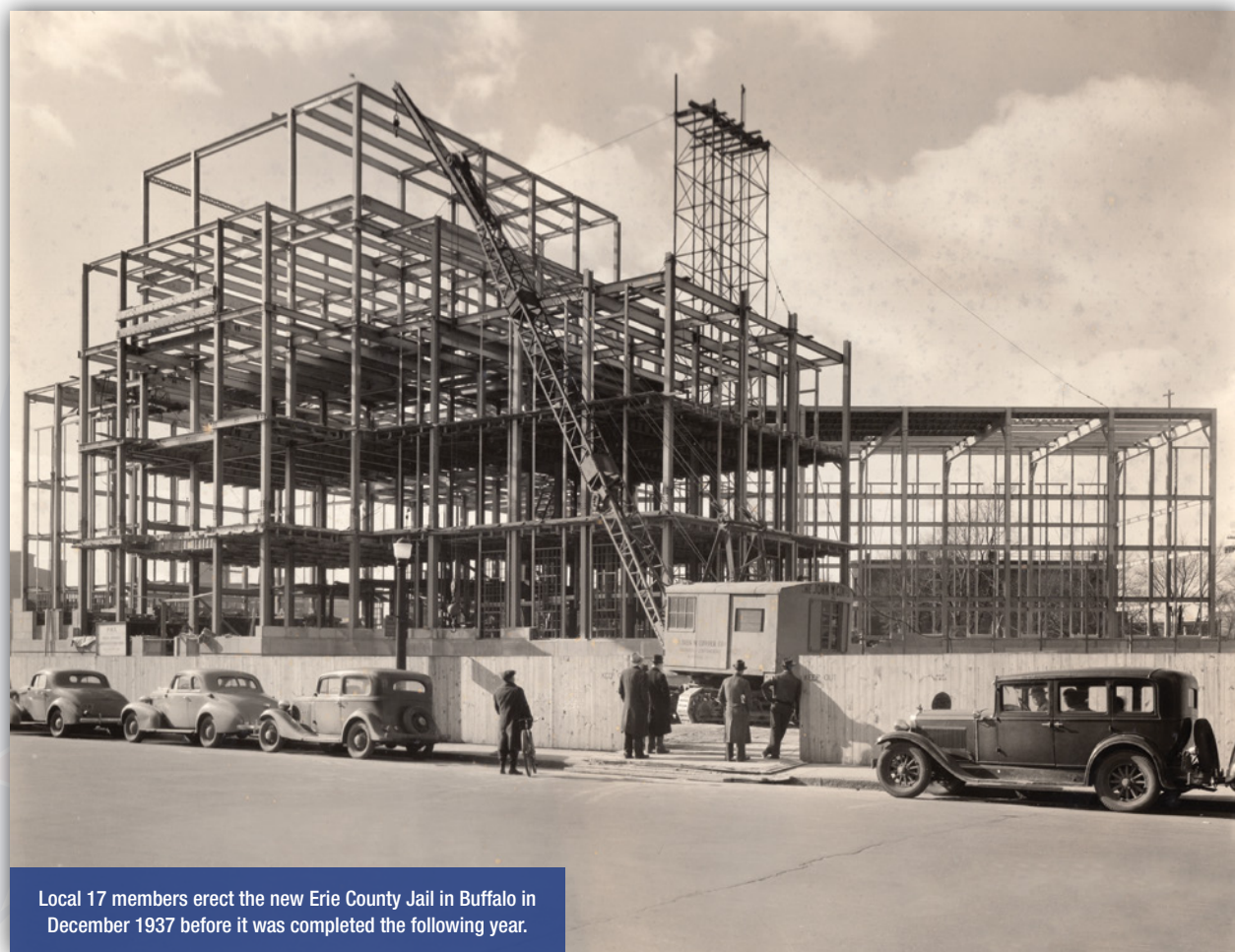
But after many of those and other jobs ended and no new significant construction in its jurisdiction was started, Local 17 felt the full weight of the Depression as its membership suffered through high unemployment. As a result, with just 60 dues-paying members by March 1933, the local approved a new work agreement with its employing contractors that decreased its members' workweek from 44 to

Local 17 mechanics construct the new Lockwood Library on the campus of the University of Buffalo in 1934 for its opening in May 1935.



Local 17 mechanics build the new Norton Hall (now Harriman Hall) on the campus of the University of Buffalo in 1933 to house the School of Education and campus life functions including a bookstore.





Local 17 members erect the new Erie County Jail in Buffalo in December 1937 before it was completed the following year.

40 hours and also reduced their minimum wage scale from \$1.25 to \$1.12-1/2 per hour.

The Federal “New Deal” legislation championed by U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt to create jobs and combat the destructive effects of the Depression provided a measure of relief to the country and the I.U.O.E. membership. Officially the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933, its series of economic actions and worker-friendly measures that assisted unions and affected workers’ rights, such as the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, which guaranteed employees the right to form and join unions and to collectively bargain for contracts through representatives of their choosing, helped provide jobs for the local’s membership during 1934 and much of the second half of the decade.

The subsequent influx of federally funded projects in Western New York put many Local 17 members to work on jobs that included the massive **Buffalo Sewer Replacement Project** under the Public Works Administration, a New Deal agency, between March 1936 and June 1939. At a cost of \$15-million (equivalent to \$343-million in 2025), the city sewers replacement was one of the largest construction projects in the country at the time.

Elsewhere, Local 17 mechanics helped build the new **Erie County Jail** in Buffalo in 1937 and 1938 and a new terminal at **Buffalo Municipal Airport** in 1938. During the final years of the decade, among several other large-scale jobs, members also worked on the new **Lakeview Housing Project** on Buffalo’s west side that would contain 696 low-cost living units on 20 acres.

Meanwhile, the I.U.O.E. provided the local with a replacement charter issued December 31, 1938, after the local requested a charter with its “certified jurisdiction.” The new charter – which would be replaced in 1999 – decreed the local had territorial jurisdiction of Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie, Orleans, Wyoming and the western portion of Genesee counties of New York.

With World War II already being fought in Asia and Europe beginning in the late 1930s, the United States and Local 17 were finally pulled out of the Great Depression as the country entered the 1940s and its industries began producing military materiel. Even before the United States officially entered the conflict following the surprise attack by Imperial Japan on the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, Buffalo was a major hub for war production, particularly in aircraft, steel and other manufacturing, providing the local’s expanding membership with ample employment throughout the war.

One of the key wartime projects the local’s mechanics helped erect was the **Curtiss-Wright Corporation Plant No. 2** near the

Buffalo Airport in 1940 and 1941, which would produce more than 17,000 planes, including thousands of P-40 Warhawk fighter-bombers and C-46 Commando cargo aircrafts. (The 1.5-million-square-foot factory would be taken over by Westinghouse after the war and eventually demolished.)

After the war ended with the surrenders of Nazi Germany on May 7, 1945, and then Japan on September 2 of that year to the U.S.-led Allies, much-neglected road construction work began to provide the local’s operating engineers with continuous workhours. What’s more, construction in the local’s jurisdiction likewise boomed – and the local was able to organize numerous companies under the union’s collective bargaining agreements.

PROSPERITY, THEN FIGHTING BACK

Employment conditions remained strong for Local 17 in the 1950s and 1960s, during which it also continued to control a substantial portion of the market share of construction work in its jurisdiction. With a large number of significant road jobs, including extensive upgrades to **Interstate 90**



A Local 17 member operates a loader during construction of a new terminal at the Buffalo Municipal Airport in 1938.

during the 1950s and construction of the 3.6-mile **Scajaquada Expressway**, or New York State Route 198, in Buffalo in 1952, the local's membership grew and prospered throughout those decades.

The local began that period by marking its 50th charter anniversary with a dinner-dance celebration at Hotel Statler on May 13, 1950.

As the decade progressed, the local again gained another new work agreement with the Construction Industry Employers Association for its operating engineers in June 1954 without having to strike. The new contract called for the local's roughly 1,200 members to receive a 12-1/2-cent hourly pay raise retroactive to June 1 and another 2-1/2 cents on October 1 of that year, boosting the local's top basic wage rate for engineers to \$3.15-1/2 per hour.

But nearly 1,000 of the local's members walked off their jobs on June 1 the following

year after contract negotiations failed to produce a new agreement with the Employers Association, stalling projects on which the mechanics were working that included the Town of Tonawanda's water plant, upgrades to the **C.R. Huntley Generating Station** in Tonawanda, an addition to the **Millard Fillmore Hospital**, most road construction in Erie County. The crippling eight-day strike ended on June 8 when the local's membership accepted a new work contract that provided an 8-cent hourly wage increase for mechanics and the majority of the significant working-condition provisions sought by the union.

The following year, Local 17 and the Construction Industry Employers Association settled their contract on May 27 – four days before their current agreement was to expire. The new two-year deal was unanimously approved that day by the local's nearly 2,000 members.



A Local 17 member works on upgrades to the Lockport Tunnel water and utility tunnel in Buffalo in 1942.

Local 17 members and guests attend the local's 50th Anniversary Banquet at Hotel Statler in Buffalo on May 12, 1950.



With work remaining steady when not abundant throughout the remainder of the decade and into the 1960s, the local and the Employers Association signed a **first-ever three-year-long work agreement** on May 27, 1960. The pact, which would expire on May 31, 1963, provided hourly pay raises of 15 cents on June 1 and another 5 cents on December 1, 1960; 12 cents on June 1 and another 5 cents on December 1, 1961; and 12 cents on June 1 and 6 cents on December 1, 1962 – after which the local's base wage would be \$5.10 per hour.

The agreement also called for employers to contribute 10 cents per hour worked by the local's members to the **Engineers Joint Welfare Fund**, which had been established in the previous contract on June 1, 1958, to provide healthcare insurance as a fringe benefit for the local's members. The new agreement also stipulated that employers would contribute another 10 cents per hour worked to a new **Local 17 Pension Fund** to provide retirement benefits to members.

Local 17 also averted a strike with the Highway Division of the Associated General Contractors that was to begin the following

day when the local and four other I.U.O.E. locals signed a statewide agreement with the contractors for roadwork. The new contract called for an immediate 15-cent hourly wage increase and 20-cent increases both on October 1 of 1962 and 1963 before the pact expired on October 1, 1964.

Back out in the field, key jobs on which the local's members were working included another overhaul for the Municipal Airport, the recently renamed **Greater Buffalo International Airport**, that added a new control tower and a concourse for American Airlines in 1961. Additional work in the local's jurisdiction further included a major expansion of the **Brooks Memorial Hospital** in Dunkirk that was completed in 1962, construction of the new **Buffalo & Erie County Central Public Library** that was completed in 1964 and multiple projects for the new **State University of New York at Fredonia** campus throughout the decade.

The local engaged in another strike beginning August 19, 1963, against five ready-mix concrete plants and gravel pits that were employing more than 100 of the local's members. After

Local 17 Business Managers

Prior to 1965, Local 17's jurisdiction was overseen and its contracts were administered by business agents who were elected along with the other officers of the union every two years. In 1965, the local elected its first fulltime business manager, a position that made the operation of Local 17 much more efficient in that it now had one officer responsible for the direction of the organization.

Thomas J. Hopkins
1965 – 1971

Richard G. Chaffee
1971 – 1974

Leo A. Hopkins
1974 – 1991

Thomas G. Hopkins
1991 – 1997

Mark N. Kirsch
1998 – 2008

None
(Local 17 under I.U.O.E.
International supervision)
2008 – 2014

Norman J. Noon
2014 – 2016

Gary Swain
2016 – 2023

William "Bill" Fekete
2023 – current



First-ever Local 17 Business Manager Thomas J. Hopkins (far right) receives the Bishop's Plaque Award from the Reverend Pius A. Benincasa, auxiliary bishop of Buffalo, and the Reverend Msgr. Stanley A. Kulpinski, director of the Diocesan Labor-Management College, during graduation ceremonies at the college in Buffalo in 1966.

among other things, extensive dredging of the river performed by Local 17 members.

As construction in its area and the administration and negotiation needs of the local each continued to unilaterally escalate, in 1965 the membership elected **Thomas J. Hopkins** to serve as the local's first-ever fulltime business manager, a new position that would make the local's operations

nine days, the walkout ended with a settlement called for a 55-cent-per-hour total wage increase payable in increments of 20 cents the first year, 20 cents the next year and 15 cents in 1965, in addition to provisions covering mutually agreeable medical examinations of employees – a principal issue in the dispute.

More work became available in 1964 when the Buffalo River Improvement Corporation, which had been formed to address the extreme industrial pollution of the Buffalo River, implemented its **Buffalo River Improvement Project**. Over the ensuing years and decades, a widespread cleanup process would involve,

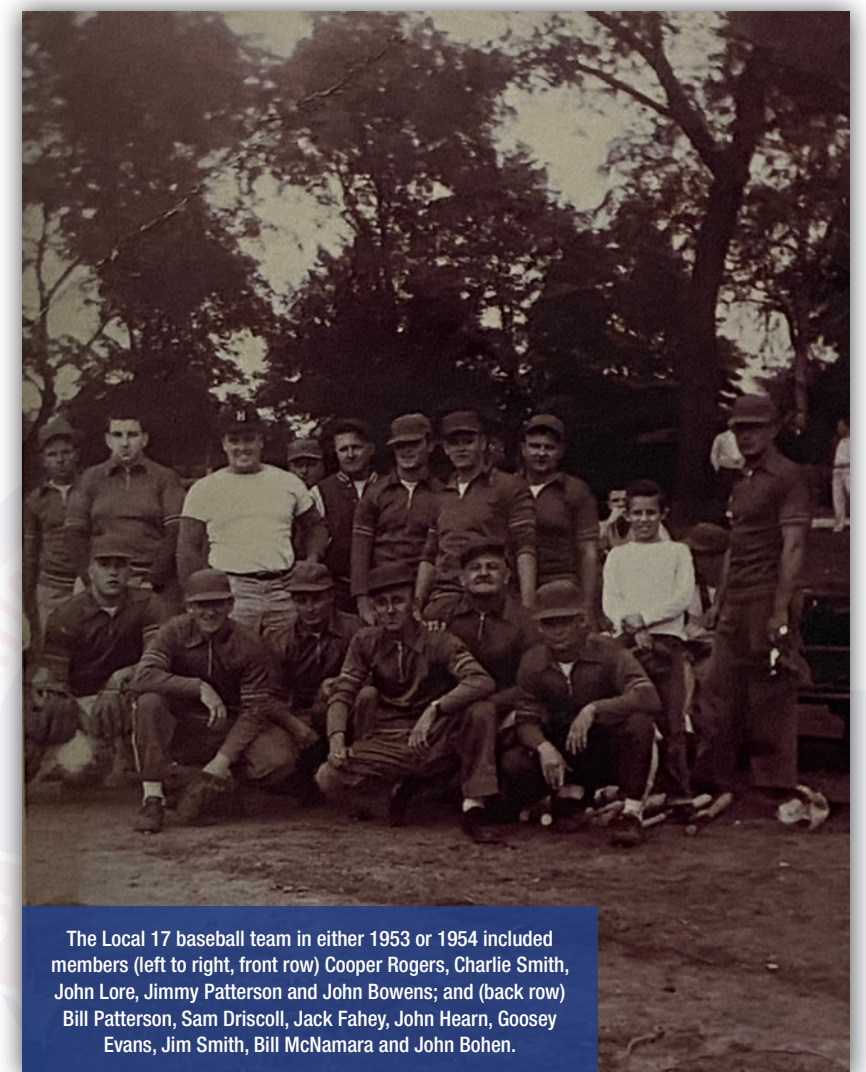
more efficient in that it now had one officer responsible for the direction of the organization. While taking on what had been the parttime work of multiple business agents, the main initial responsibility of Brother Hopkins, who had been serving as the local's senior business agent, was to organize the Southern Tier, the immediate suburban and rural areas south of Buffalo that was predominately non-union, and equipment houses in the local's territory, which also were mostly non-union.

After the local gained another new three-year work contract with the Construction Industry Employers Association in May 1966

that covered 1,700 members, it then went on a month-long strike for a new heavy-highway agreement with the Associated General Contractors that ended November 1, 1967. But employment conditions remained strong, keeping the local's members working during that time and the balance of the decade on projects such as multiple road-construction jobs and erecting a new auxiliary terminal for the International Airport beginning in 1969.

But on June 9 of that year, Local 17 walked off their jobs to begin what would be a six-week-long strike that halted \$150-million worth of area building and highway projects as more than 9,000 other building-tradespeople from other unions honored the operating engineers' picket lines. **"The Great Strike"** ended on July 20, 1969, and the local's 1,200 operators returned to work after the local and the Construction Industry Employers Association, with assistance from a Federal mediator, reached a deal on a new work agreement that provided a new wage-and-benefits package that equaled a \$3.35-per-hour increase over the three years of the contract.

In the aftermath, the strike laid down an important foundation upon which Local 17 has prospered and grown ever since. Indeed, the sacrifices of the members who walked those picket lines daily across Western New York and suffered financial hardships for six weeks strengthened the local and subsequently allowed thousands of Local 17 members to live, retire and die with dignity.



The Local 17 baseball team in either 1953 or 1954 included members (left to right, front row) Cooper Rogers, Charlie Smith, John Lore, Jimmy Patterson and John Bownes; and (back row) Bill Patterson, Sam Driscoll, Jack Fahey, John Hearn, Goosey Evans, Jim Smith, Bill McNamara and John Bohen.

Historic Projects, Hard Times

While Buffalo and Western New York would experience widespread economic decline and disinvestment, especially in the city's downtown areas, as the city's economy suffered from the departure of major industries in the 1970s, Local 17 members stayed relatively busy with employment on major jobs that included construction of the new **Marine Midland Center** in downtown Buffalo that began in 1969. When completed in 1972, the 40-story office skyscraper would be the tallest building in the city – a distinction it maintains in 2025 as it is being redeveloped into the Seneca One Tower office and apartment building.

The local also gained a new, three-year work agreement covering its operating engineers employed in heavy construction and road-building when it came to terms with the Associated General Contractors on July 28, 1971. The first year of the pact calls for a pay-and-benefits package increase of 75 cents per hour retroactive to April 1 and another 50 cents on August 1, after which the contract would be “reopened” to negotiate future wages and benefits.

More high-profile work for the local’s members then came with construction of **Highmark Stadium** in Orchard Park, New York, that would serve as the new home field for the Buffalo Bills of the National Football League after it opened in August 1973. Among other projects providing the local with workhours during that time of dwindling employment were multiple jobs for the new, \$610-million North Campus of the **University of Buffalo at Amherst**, which would be the largest campus in the State University of New

York system; construction of the **Erie County Comprehensive Health Center** on the Meyer Memorial Hospital grounds; a Millard Fillmore Hospital expansion program; and another expansion and renovation of the original terminal at the Greater Buffalo International Airport that was completed in 1973.

But the depressed construction industry of Western New York had ultimately resulted in widespread unemployment among its 2,400-strong membership as Local 17 moved into 1974. “We are wanting for jobs,” Local 17 outgoing **President Raymond J. Fahey** declared in the August 7, 1974, *Buffalo News* the week after he was defeated in a reelection bid for his position – which, according to the newspaper, “labor observers” believed was the result of the “large-scale unemployment” in the local.

Among the scant jobs that did supply a healthy amount of workhours for the local’s members during the second half of the 1970s was construction of the new, waterfront



Local 17 members who helped the local surpass its goal for its 1955 blood drive and donated 218 pints of blood to the Red Cross included (left to right) Albert Yox, Michael Comerford, President John McCann, drive Chairman Thomas Nunan, Albert Yox Jr., James Yox, John Lore, Philip Ransome, Kenneth Swain and Gene Lannen with a nurse’s aide and Blood Committee Chairman James M. Horrigan as Santa Claus.



Local 17 members (left to right, seated) Dennis Driscoll, John A. Stanton Sr., John Fisher, Daniel Comerford, Andrew P. Meaney Sr. and Thomas J. O’Brien; and (standing) Ed Daly, John Linn, Edward Stanton, James P. Tobin, John Harley, George Chaffee, John Milligan and Jacob Bautz pose after receiving their 40-year I.U.O.E. service awards during a dinner-dance at the Glen Park Casino in Williamsville, New York, on October 31, 1964.

Buffalo Hilton hotel beginning in 1975. Now the Buffalo Grand Hotel but closed since 2020, after it was initially completed in 1978 it was the largest hotel in the Buffalo area.

As the difficult decade was coming to a close, Local 17 received an immeasurable boost to its employment picture with the start of construction on the **Buffalo Metro Rail** public-transit rail system in 1979. Over the next seven years, many of the local’s mechanics would be gainfully employed on constructing the 6.4-mile-long light-rail line through the city, about 80 percent of which runs through underground tunnels constructed by the operating engineers.

Meanwhile, on November 11, 1980, Local 17 and five other building-trades unions in Buffalo reached an agreement with their respective contractors on new, three-year labor contracts. The accords, which would provide annual increases in wages and benefits totaling \$5.15 per hour, were historic in the region’s construction industry as they marked the first time any parties had agreed on new contracts eight months before their existing agreements expired.

With members also working on a \$29-million Buffalo Sewer Authority project and highway work mainly involving major construction on **Route 219** and the **Lockport Expressway** and rehabilitation work on the Thruway in West Seneca and the Scajaquada Expressway, on April 4, 1981, the local then unanimously approved a new, three-year heavy-and-highway contract with the Highway Chapter of the Associated General Contractors that covered those projects and others, including the Metro Rail. The pact provided a wage-and-benefits package worth an immediate 10.4-percent pay, another 10 percent the following year and 9.1 percent in the third year ending April 1, 1984.

Following an 11-day strike by about 110 of its utility engineers, the local also signed a new, three-year work agreement with the Council of Utility Contractors on May 2, 1981. The contract, primarily covering members working on sewer and waterline projects, also provided annual wage-and-benefits increases totaling 29.5 percent over the life of the pact.

But with the Metro Rail nearing completion of its initial stages, poor employment returned

Continued after following spread.

Local 17 Apprenticeship and Training A HERITAGE OF EDUCATING ITS SKILLED WORKFORCE

HELP THE APPRENTICE ENGINEER

Local 17 announced in the June 1927 issue of *The Operating Engineer*, the monthly member publication of the I.U.O.E., that the above "is the slogan of Local No. 17 for 1927." While since its founding in January 1900 the local had instituted a system of apprenticeship, by which trainees learn the trade while working on jobsites with veteran journeyman operating engineers, the local did not yet have a formal apprentice-training program in place – so its officers made it the local's mission to have its journeymen pay better attention to educating apprentices while on the job.

However, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the Local 17 membership voted to appropriate a portion of their collective bargaining agreement's wage-and-benefits increase to a fund dedicated to training members and apprentices, establishing the **Operating Engineers Local 17 Training Fund**. The trust fund, which is governed by an equal number of union and contractor trustees, was originally funded by a 10-cent-per-hour-worked contribution by the local's employers with the Buffalo Construction Industry Employers Association, the

Southern Tier Builders Association and the Associated General Contractors' Heavy Highway Equipment Division.

The local then used the Training Fund in 1972 to purchase the 400-acre former Acme Shale and Brickyard property on Pleasant Avenue in the Town of Lake View, on which it erected the **Operating Engineers Local 17 Training Center** in 1973. The fund also began acquiring training equipment and participated in an Excess Government Equipment program with the Federal government that provided apparatus and machinery needed to conduct training programs.

Because construction work was slow and employment was down at the time, the fund trustees decided that upgrading and retraining Local 17 members would take priority. With that, members had the opportunity to improve their skills as well as acquire new ones through hands-on and classroom instruction at the Training Center.

But soon after, it became apparent that it was critical to the future of Local 17 to institute formal apprentice education. After a great deal of investigation and research involving apprentice programs throughout the United States, the Training Fund implemented its New York State Department of Labor-certified **Local 17 Apprentice Training Program** and accepted its first group of students in 1979.

With Local 17 officers serving as instructors, initially headed by **Training Coordinator and Local 17 Vice-President Art Lamb**, the apprentices would learn on the job while being paid and also gain supplemental knowledge



through instruction in the training center's classrooms and workshops and at the controls of its 40 pieces of heavy equipment. Local 17 **Business Manager Leo Hopkins** explained in the May 23, 1980, issue of *The Buffalo News* at the time: "We want well-trained newcomers in our journeymen ranks, so our employers will always have a pool of skilled workers to draw from. We want to make union craftsmen better than non-union craftsmen, so contractors who hire our members can do a better job than their non-union competitors."

Over the next four years, apprentices trained on machinery by creating a 25-acre lake stocked with trout, black bass, speckled perch and catfish on the training center's property. The lake would be part of a private park built on the site. The Local 17 Training Fund has also participated in many civic projects in order to provide the opportunity for apprentices to gain experience on worksites, including building soccer fields, baseball diamonds and Boy Scout camps and cleaning lakefront storm damage.

The no-cost, "earn-while-you-learn" apprenticeship program has evolved to consist of a minimum of four



years and 5,000 hours of training both on the job and in classrooms and labs. The Training Fund also continues to provide numerous upgrading opportunities to journeymen and provides classes for certifications that are mandatory in the construction industry today – helping to ensure Local 17 members can meet the needs and safety requirements of the continually changing construction industry.

The first class of Local 17 apprentices is sworn into the local's new Apprentice Training Program in 1979.



to the local's membership and worsened as the 1980s progressed. An escalating incursion of non-union labor further degraded the local's employment condition as well; for instance, in 1980 in just Erie County alone, 35 projects – or 47 percent of the construction market the local sought – were awarded to open-shop employers, a far cry from the share the local had commanded just a decade earlier.

At one point in 1982, about 40 percent of the local's members had been unemployed or "underemployed" during the previous year. At the time, unemployment among area building-trades workers was about 50 percent of the workforce.

However, Local 17 undertook several efforts to counter the depressed state of the Western New York economy and high unemployment. In addition to increasing its picketing of non-union projects within its jurisdiction, the local joined several other building-trades unions as the **Western New York Pension Investment Foundation** to provide financing from their own pension funds for construction projects that created about 700 jobs by October 1983, including a **Hyatt Regency Hotel**, a Hills department

store in Buffalo, a gymnasium at **Daemen College** and a Hamburg nursing home.

But as unemployment averaged 50 percent among its 2,000 members, on June 1, 1984, Local 17 agreed to a new, three-year labor contract with the Associated General Contractors that froze wages at previous levels of \$11.25 to \$15.65 per hour for the term of the agreement. However, the contract did provide a total \$2 increase for fringe benefits to \$5.35 per hour for medical insurance, retirement benefits and training.

The local's members did work on one of the most notable projects in its jurisdiction during the decade with construction of the new **Pilot Stadium** baseball park in downtown Buffalo beginning in July 1986 for the city's minor-league baseball team, the Buffalo Bisons. Now known as **Sahlen Field**, the 16,600-seat stadium opened in April 1988 after Local 17 and four other building-trades unions had initially agreed in 1985 to lend up to \$3 million from their pension funds to purchase the property in downtown Buffalo on which the facility was built.

During that time, the local gained a new, three-year work contract for heavy roadwork

and bridges with the Associated General Contractors after a 10-day strike that ended April 22, 1987, with agreement on the new deal. Under the contract, the local's total hourly pay-and-benefits package of between \$18.88 and \$23.03 per hour would be increased in increments by \$3.50 over the duration of the pact.

Another new three-year agreement for Local 17 members involved in building construction went into effect July 1, 1987, with a total \$3-per-hour increase for pay and benefits that would ultimately raise the local's top journeyman wage to \$26.53 per hour. With that, for the first time in decades, the local's members would be paid the same rates for work on buildings, roads and sewers.

In defending the new hourly increases, which included contributions for pensions, health insurance and apprentice training, gained during the ongoing depressed economic times, Local 17 **Field**

Representative Thomas Hopkins explained in a May 31, 1987, *Buffalo News* article, "Our members are working less than half a year. It would be big money if they worked the same number of hours as industrial workers, but they average 800 to 900 hours of work in Western New York." He also stated that the wage increases "were necessary to keep members of the skilled trades from moving to areas where there is more construction work."



Local 17 members (top to bottom) Leroy Tislow, Vern Marzolf, Lee Miller and T. J. Jones work on construction of the Scajaquada wastewater tunnel for the Buffalo Sewer Authority in October 1980.



Local 17 operators prepare the site for construction of the new Pilot Field (now Sahlen Field) baseball park in 1986 for its opening as the home stadium of the minor-league Buffalo Bisons in 1988.

LANDMARK CAMPAIGNS, MERGER

Having deployed a number of tactics – besides striking – to counter the non-union construction industry and the high unemployment rates of the late 1980s that continued into the 1990s, one of the higher-priority targets of the local's efforts was “double-breasted” contractors that operated both union and non-union companies. In 1985, the local and other building-trade locals even financed an investigation by lawyers and law students to discourage the practice of double-breasting so that more work would be done under union contracts – or to bring construction companies to court to show they had created non-union firms to evade paying union wages.

Among other campaigns conducted by the local with the purpose of protecting its industry and creating more jobs for its membership, in early 1988 it joined other unions in agreeing to major work-rules concessions in exchange

for the promises that their members would be employed on construction of the 1.6-million-square-foot, super-regional **Walden Galleria** shopping mall located in Cheektowaga, New York. Those dispensations by the operating engineers included suspending contract rules under which second- and third-shift workers are paid for eight hours of work but are only on the job for seven hours.

Picketing remained a key tactic for the local as well, and sometimes with a twist as it often flew a large helium-filled balloon with a sign saying “Scabs Below” over outdoor construction work being performed by non-union firms. In one other particular instance of the local protecting its jobs, Local 17 (along with four other locals) resigned from the Buffalo Building Trades Council in February 1989 because it did not agree with the council's policy that no union members would work on a \$5-million construction project at the Dunlop

Tire Company's Tonawanda plant unless it was built entirely with union labor, while several union operating engineers were employed on the job.

However, with the ongoing lack of construction work and, especially, the usual number of highway projects, during the summer of 1992 unemployment among the Local 17 membership reached about 50 percent during a period in which it was normally 15 to 20 percent.

But the local remained persistent in its efforts to generate jobs, even deploying some more-corporate methods to promote the union construction that the industry had previously rarely used. In late 1992, the local hired a public relations agency to help it spread its message about the quality of union labor, and early the following year the local was the driving force behind the creation of a one-hour radio program, “**Prospering in America**,” on station WWKB-AM that was hosted by Local 17 **Business Manager Thomas G. Hopkins** and gave labor news and discussed workplace issues.

By that time, over the previous three years Local 17 had been conducting an average of two campaigns against contractors in its area at the same time in efforts to have members employed or to gain pay increases. One of the successful campaigns, against an Orchard Park construction equipment sales and service company, involved members handing out leaflets in front of offices of the bank from which the company had its loans that read: “Do you know that bank funds are used for union busting? Don't be an accomplice to this crime.”

As construction work and some larger projects began to slowly return to Western New York during the second half of the 1990s, the local's poor employment conditions eased somewhat with jobs that included several different cross-country pipelines that came through the area. Members were also employed on construction of the new, 19-000-seat, multipurpose **Marine**



Local 17 members and officers (left to right, seated) Eric Lamb, Mark Kirsch, Thomas Hopkins, Gerald Thompson and Thomas Freedenberg; and (standing) Jerry Walker, Norman Noon, Carl Beyer, Al Puma, Gerald Bove, Billy Rankin, James Minter, Anthony Cardarelli and James Yeates pose during the retirement dinner for Brother Hopkins, who was serving as the local's business manager upon his retirement, in December 1997.



Local 17 members and guests enjoy the local's 100th Anniversary Celebration held at the Buffalo Conventions Center on May 6, 2000.



Midland Arena (now Keybank Center Arena) beginning in November 1994 that would be home to the Buffalo Sabres of the National Hockey League after it was completed in September 1996.

During that time, the Building Trades secured a labor-friendly Project Labor Agreement that helped union operating engineers, as well as other building-trades craftspeople, perform work on construction of the new terminal at the Greater Buffalo International Airport beginning in 1995. After the modern, 15-gate terminal opened on November 3, 1997, it would be renamed **Buffalo-Niagara International Airport** and its former terminals were demolished (making way for another expansion to 24 gates in 2001).

In March 1997, Local 17 also joined an unprecedented Building and Construction Trades Council organizing campaign, called the Multi-Trade Action Project, that would escalate targeted efforts to organize non-union companies. Key to the campaign was an April 9, 1997, kickoff meeting that marked the first time members of all the area's construction-craft unions gathered together.

Before the end of the decade, one of the benchmarks in the history of the local occurred when on June 1, 1999, the I.U.O.E. merged Rochester-based stationary engineers **Local No. 71**, which had jurisdiction over stationary work in Western New York, into Local 17, bringing 550 new members into the local and adding "stationary" to its trades jurisdiction. The largest single employer of the former Local 71 members, who worked in building-maintenance jobs at 22 employers around Erie County, were the Buffalo School Engineers Associates, and those members also worked at the Buffalo Zoo, the Buffalo Convention Center, Buffalo General Hospital and Mercy Hospital.

While the remaining 550 members of Local 71 became members of I.U.O.E. **Local No. 832** in Rochester, the amalgamation

immediately strengthened Local 17 and opened the door to organizing workers outside its base in the construction industry. The I.U.O.E. subsequently issued branch **Local No. 17-S** charter to cover the local's new stationary members, bearing the date of June 1, 1999.

NEW HALL, SUPERVISION, NIAGARA

Local 17 welcomed the new "Y2K (Year 2000) millennium by celebrating its 100th charter anniversary with a dinner-dance at the Buffalo Conventions Center on May 6, 2000. More than 800 local and International Union officers, members and guests attended the gala function.

The 2,300-member local then built a new **Operating Engineers Local 17 Union Hall** on its 400-acre property in the Town of Lake View in 2002, across from the **Local 17 Training Center** it erected in 1973. With the modern and spacious headquarters 5959 Versailles Road, in which the local is still located as it celebrates its 125th charter anniversary in 2025, the local centralized all of its administrative and training in one location after it moved from its longtime former union hall in the Town of West Seneca, New York.

Meanwhile, a nearly 12-week long strike by the local's roughly 300 heavy and highway engineers that began April 4, 2002, stalled several road projects on which they were working around Western New York, including widening the Thruway in West Seneca, rebuilding Main Street in Buffalo's University Heights and improvements to Walden Avenue and Union Road in Cheektowaga. The members returned to their jobs on June 22 after Local 17 and the Associated General Contractors, New York Chapter agreed to terms on a new, four-year-long labor contract.

Employment for most all of the local's members remained steady as the first decade of the new millennium proceeded and the local continued to make advances. In yet another

noteworthy gain, the Adams Mark Hotel in Buffalo signed a one-year work contract with the local on October 4, 2007, seven years after hotel maintenance workers voted to unionize, ending one of the longest-running labor disputes in Erie County.

However, on April 8 the following year, 12 officers and members of Local 17 were arrested by federal agents and state police on "felony counts of labor racketeering and extortion," as reported by the next day's *Buffalo News*. According to the newspaper, "A federal indictment accused Local 17 leaders and members of dozens of threats and instances of vandalism and harassment against non-union workers and contractors. At times, members of other unions were also targeted. Much of the activity took place at major publicly funded construction projects, including the expansion of Roswell Park Cancer Institute and renovations at Ralph Wilson Stadium."

The I.U.O.E. International Office subsequently took administrative control of the 2,400-member local beginning April 15, initially under I.U.O.E. Northeast Regional Director Dan McGraw, and would keep it under international supervision for the next six-and-a-half years. "The action was necessary," the I.U.O.E. explained in a statement released that day, "to protect the interests of the local union and its members."

I.U.O.E. General President James T. Callahan would formally release Local 17 from international supervision on October 29, 2014.

Over the course of that time and half-a-decade beyond, four of the accused members and officers were acquitted of the crimes by juries and six others took plea agreements and were convicted. More than 11 years after his arrest, former Local 17 business manager and president Mark N. Kirsch was sentenced on August 8, 2019, to 18 months in prison, a reduction from the 36





Local 17 members participate in Buffalo's St. Patrick's Day Parade in 2022.

months he received three years earlier after he appealed that sentence, after he had been “found guilty of overseeing a decade-long campaign of violence, vandalism and intimidation against non-union contractors,” as the August 9 *Buffalo News* reported.

Following a work slowdown during and after the so-called “Great Recession of 2007,” the most severe economic collapse in the United States since the Great Depression, employment dramatically escalated for the Local 17 membership as it made its way through the first half of the 2010s. Sizeable jobs in addition to roadwork that provided the local’s members with mounting workhours included construction of the 20-story **LECOM Harborcenter** mixed-use development in Buffalo that began in March 2013 and was completed in August 2015 with retail and restaurant space, a 205-room Marriott hotel and two ice-hockey rinks.

Construction work in its jurisdiction and, as a result, employment for its members continued to swell during the second half of the decade, as the local was further bolstered by a surge of renewable-energy projects such as the 36-turbine **Arkwright Wind Farm Project** in Chautauqua County. In fact, work in its jurisdiction was so good that in September

2017 the local stripped 24 new members from non-union employers in the Buffalo area, pushing the local’s membership to 1,600.

The local’s territorial jurisdiction also expanded when the I.U.O.E. merged 108-year-old Niagara County-based **Local No. 463** into Local 17 on May 1, 2019, to create a single local of 2,000 members to serve the Buffalo-Niagara region. The once-powerful Niagara local, which among many iconic projects erected the Niagara Power Project in the early 1960s, had dwindled by early 2019 to just 170 active operating engineers and apprentices, more than 20 of whom were annually working in the Local 17 jurisdiction.

“This merger is necessary because Local 463 is a local decreasing in membership, with geographic jurisdiction limited to Niagara County,” I.U.O.E. President Callahan explained in a March 18, 2019, letter to both locals. “The industrial base in this area has continued to decline over time and infrastructure spending in Niagara County by the state of New York has remained flat or has experienced little improvement during the years.” He went on to declare, “The merger will provide greater efficiency and will enhance the ability to protect the interests of the membership of both locals.”

Former I.U.O.E. Locals 71 and 463

Two MERGERS TRANSFORMED LOCAL 17

I.U.O.E. “Stationary Engineers” **Local No. 71** of Rochester, New York, was originally chartered by the international union on June 24, 1901, to serve Rochester and vicinity. The union merged three stationary locals into Local 71 during its existence: Local No. 11 of Syracuse on March 1, 1966; Local No. 107 of Utica, New York, on August 1, 1966; and Local No. 907 of Buffalo on September 1, 1979.

The I.U.O.E. merged the stationary members and territorial jurisdiction of Local 71 that were covered by Local 17’s territorial jurisdiction into the Buffalo local on **June 1, 1999**, while all other jurisdiction and members were merged into Local No. 832 of Rochester. With the merger, Local 17 became a “mixed” hoisting & portable and stationary engineers local, for which a charter for branch **Local No. 17-S** was issued that day for the local’s stationary members.

Nearly 20 years later, the I.U.O.E. merged Niagara Falls, New York-based **Local No. 463** and its roughly 180 hoisting

& portable and stationary engineers into Local 17 effective **May 1, 2019**. While Local 463 had served one of the most iconic regions in the world since it was chartered on June 1, 1911, to serve Niagara County, including constructing the Niagara Power Project that, once completed in 1963, was the largest hydropower facility in the Western world, by 2019 the industrial-manufacturing base and infrastructure spending in its jurisdiction had declined, leading to a steep loss of employment and membership.

The amalgamation of Local 463 into Local 17 created a single local of 2,000 members with significantly greater resources to serve western New York State. As such, the merger would provide greater efficiency through a single local, thereby enhancing Local 17’s ability to protect the interests of the membership in its expanded territory, which then included Niagara County.



Operating Engineers Local 463 members help build the Robert Moses Niagara Hydroelectric Power Station on the Niagara River during 1960.



New (and current) Local 17 President Josh Williams (left) and Business Manager Bill Fekete pose outside the local's union hall and offices after being sworn into their positions in September 2023. (Photo courtesy of WNYLaborToday.com)

GOING STRONG TO YEAR No. 125

The local's progress was slowed by the onset of 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. The pandemic curbed construction work in Western New York and, therefore, employment for Local 17 members, while the local practiced safety precautions such as social distancing, canceling meetings and training and closing its hall temporarily to help stop the spread of the virus.

But as the pandemic subsided beginning in late 2020, the local's employment conditions again escalated – boosted by wind-farm and solar-field renewable-energy projects including the 108-megawatt **Ball Hill Wind Farm** in Hanover and Villenova, New York. Those projects and many on which the local's members have worked since 2000 were made possible in large part because of the local's political activism, which has lobbied heavily for the funding of renewable-energy sources.

The local gained another milestone victory for members when it secured a new, four-year contract for more than 200 **Buffalo Public Schools custodians** in 2022 that will run through June 2026. The agreement provided the underpaid custodians with a \$1,250 signing bonus; wage increases of 25 percent for the first year, 4 percent for the second and 3 percent for each of the third and fourth years; and no-cost healthcare benefits.

In the ensuing years leading up to its 125th anniversary in 2025, the Local 17 membership was extremely busy with work on a wide range of projects, including the 500,000-square-foot, the **Great Lakes Cheese plant** in the Town of Franklinville, New York, beginning in 2023. A large amount of road and bridge work has also added to the local's workhours throughout the balance of the first half of the 2020s.

The highlight of the local's recent work activity, however, has been construction of the **New Highmark Stadium** in Orchard Park that began in June 2023 across from the current Highmark Stadium, which the new facility will replace as the home of the Buffalo Bills beginning with the team's 2026 season. The 62,000-seat,

\$1.4-billion stadium is the largest construction project in Western New York history to be built with union labor, which has included many Local 17 mechanics and apprentices.

As the local has remained employed on an extraordinary amount of work into 2025, it has had record numbers of apprentices in its training program in 2023 – with an all-time high of 51 – 2024 and 2025, with that year's class approaching 60 trainees. What's more, the local has maintained its stout portion of the region's highway construction market share; its more than 400 stationary-side engineers and surveyor members have likewise enjoyed steady employment and contract gains; and its construction-side operators have benefited greatly from increased construction spending and project labor agreements secured by the Building Trades Council.

Also in 2023, the local's members elected new **Business Manager Bill Fekete**, new **President Josh Williams** and a total of 15 Executive Board representatives to lead them through historically busy times and into a promising future beyond the local's 125th anniversary. (Brother Fekete took over from former **Business Manager Gary Swain**, who retired that year.)

Refusing to be complacent despite the favorable conditions, the local and its leadership continued to actively organize individual mechanics as well as companies into Local 17. As a result, the local has increased in size by more than 100 new members during the past couple of years, and in 2025 it represents about 2,000 hosting & portable and stationary operating engineers and other members who work in repair shops and quarries, as well as members in a growing number of public-sector units who are employed by towns or municipalities.

For 125 years now, Local 17 has provided contractors with competent and qualified operating engineers and apprentices, who through the local's training program are given the skills and education to meet the needs of the continually changing construction industry – allowing them to be the highest-paid of the construction trades in Buffalo. The local will continue to build on its history to ensure its members are well-represented and its jurisdiction covering Erie, Niagara, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Orleans, Wyoming and Western Genesee counties is served by the most qualified workforce of operating engineers available. ●



Local 17 members operate cranes and machinery erecting the New Highmark Stadium in the Buffalo suburb of Orchard Park in 2025 for its opening in 2026 as the home field of the Buffalo Bills of the National Football League.

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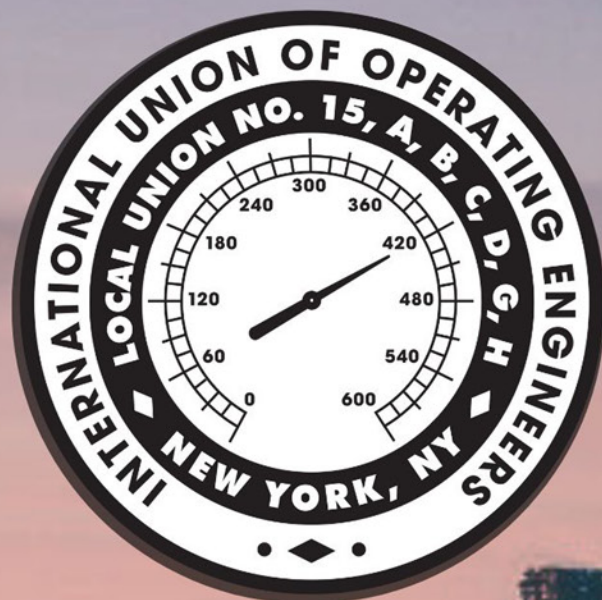
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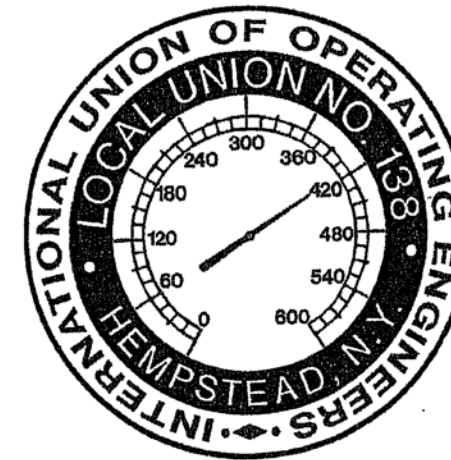
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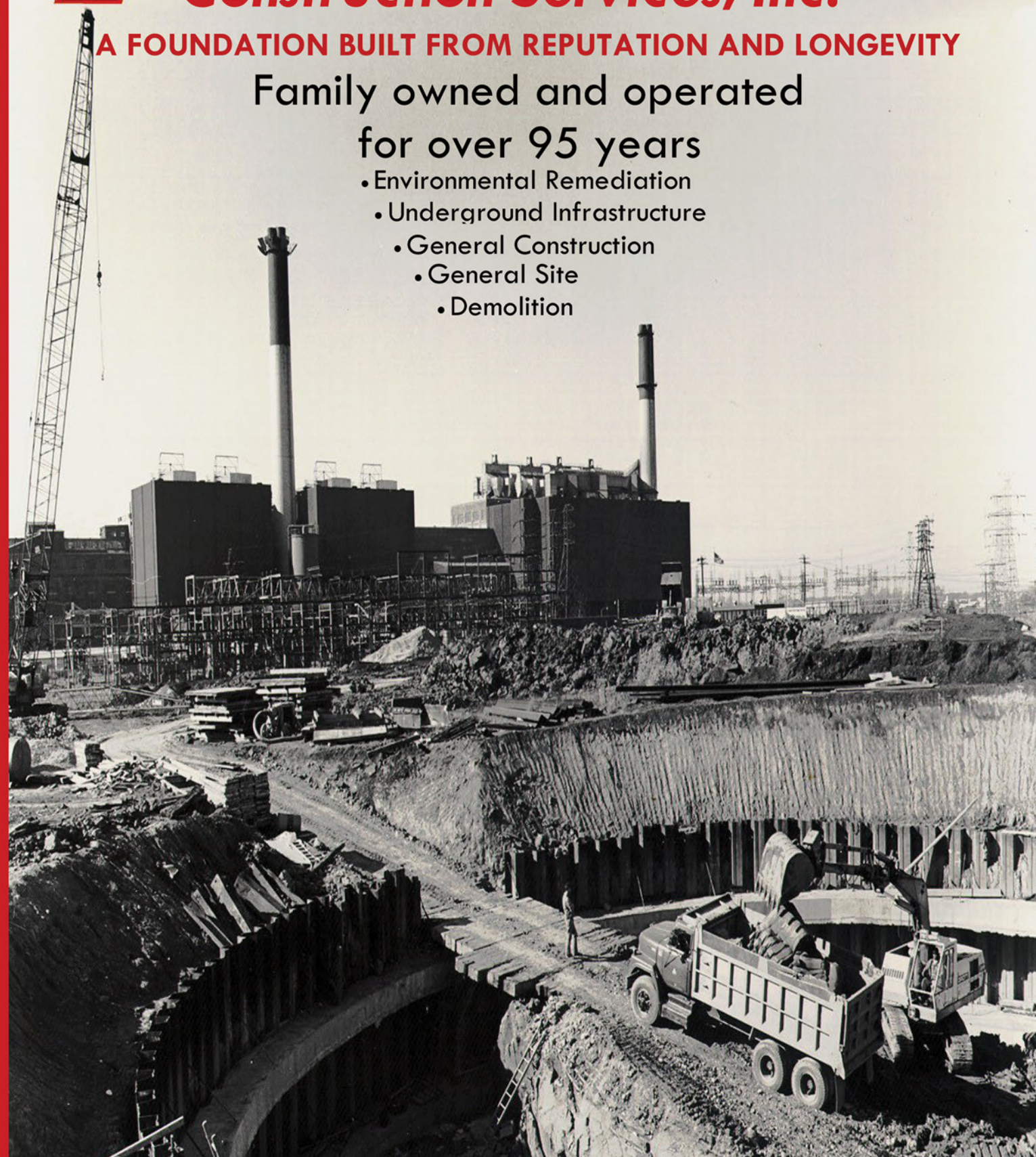


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WNYLaborToday.com - *Your On-Line Labor News Outlet*, would like to *congratulate* the Leadership, Executive Board and Membership of International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) Local 17 on its 125th Anniversary, *a feat of longevity not realized by many* other Labor Organizations, *let alone many businesses across the* Western New York Region.

My and WNYLaborToday.com's relationship *is both unique and special* with Local 17.

As a Member of Local 17 (who was brought aboard your Building Trades Union by then-Business Manager Tom Hopkins back in the 90s), I would *first like to personally thank a long line* of leadership - beginning with Tom Hopkins right through your present leadership of President Josh Williams and Business Manager Bill Fekete, *for your continued support of* WNYLaborToday.com - which will celebrate its 19th year in April 2026 of providing an array of Labor News *not found anywhere else in one place across the entire* Internet.

It has been both an *honor and pleasure* to cover Local 17 throughout the years, including, *but not limited to:* Your Union's *top-notch* Apprenticeship Program *and the role you all play in pulling off* the annual Western New York Construction Career Days Event; Constructing WNY - for example the new Bills' Stadium, Ralph Wilson Park, Franklinville's *massive* Cheese Plant, and *dozens and dozens* of wind turbines across our region, to *name just a few*; *Playing such an integral role in founding* the New York Foundation for Fair Contracting; Organizing Non-Union Workers; *Fighting for better contracts for those* Members Local 17's represents; the merger of Local 17 and Local 463; *Focusing a spotlight on relocating a massive* canoe sculpture outside the AKG Art Museum in Buffalo; and the Union and its Membership *giving back to the local communities where they live, work and raise their families in, as well as the legacy* of your late BA Joe Palmeri and an annual blood drive in his name.

As I've stated, your support *has been greatly appreciated* over the years, *for without it there would be no* WNYLaborToday.com, *no opportunity to provide* Union Members *with the latest* in Labor News from across Western New York, New York State and the Nation, *as well as offer* Organized Labor *the opportunity to get its message out - unimpeded.*

As *each and every one of you enjoy your well-earned festivities* this evening, I once again *congratulate* Local 17's Leadership, your Executive Board and your Membership *on a job more than well done - and the wish* for your Union *to enjoy another 125 years of wonderful and amazing accomplishments.*

In Solidarity - My Best to All!

Tom Campbell/Editor-Publisher



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