

Last 100 years mostly 'up' for Elevator Constructors

Portland-based Local 23 reaches a milestone

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Elevator construction, as a skilled craft, has had ups and downs over the last 100 years. But thanks to their union, it's been mostly ups for members of the International Union of Elevator Constructors (IUEC).

IUEC Local 23, headquartered in Portland, turned 100 this year. To mark the occasion, about 300 members, family, and well-wishers gathered Oct. 25 at the Oregon Convention Center.

One hundred years ago, Portland had fewer than 200,000 inhabitants. The electric elevator had been invented 28 years before. After the IUEC, just seven years old, issued a charter to form Local 23, 18 elevator constructors came to the local's first meeting, on June 8, 1908.

The IUEC motto — "In union there is strength," — is part of the union's insignia. And that union strength produces one of the top wages of any occupation.

Today, journey-level elevator constructors earn \$42.09 an hour, plus \$16.29 an hour in benefits. That makes elevator construction the highest paid craft among the building trades, according to State of Oregon prevailing wage surveys.

And one of the reasons is that union firms control an unusually high percentage of the market, said Columbia-Pacific Building and Construction Trades Council Executive Secretary-Treasurer John Mohlis.

The state's chief elevator inspector, Ron Crabtree, thinks union share of the elevator market could be near 96 percent.

IUEC is unlike other building trades unions in several ways.

It negotiates a nationwide labor agreement with its counterpart employer group, National Elevator Industry, Inc. (NEII). Its industry is domi-



(Photo left) International Union of Elevator Constructors officers present "gold card" certificates to two recent Local 23 retirees, honoring them for outstanding service to the union during their careers. Pictured, from left, are General Secretary-Treasurer Kevin Stringer; retiree Dick Dodge; Assistant General President James Higgins; and retiree Dan McDonald. (Photo right) Higgins makes a forceful point about the need to put friends of labor in public office.



nated by a handful of big firms that operate nationally and even internationally, some of which, like Otis and Thyssen-Krupp, also manufacture the elevators.

An elevator installation contract typically includes free maintenance for three to six months, and is often followed by contracts with the same company to do maintenance and repair. Thus, even after elevators are in-

stalled, it's IUEC members who return to maintain and repair them over the years — a facet of the business that helps keep members employed during construction downturns. There are now 10,541 elevators in Oregon, and all of them need to be maintained and repaired periodically.

Oregon Tradeswomen Inc. Executive Director Connie Ashbrook, a longtime Local 23 member, describes the

work of elevator construction as uniquely challenging: "Imagine having to build a train from scratch inside a building. Only instead of building it horizontally, you're doing it vertically. You install the rails the elevator runs on. You build the cab itself, install the motors and machinery above, attach cables, put doors in place, set up switches and mechanisms. You don't have very much clearance. Everything

is very tight and compact. And you have to make sure that nothing rubs." IUEC members also install and repair escalators, and they put in the small residential elevators and wheelchair lifts that are increasingly common as more and more buildings are made accessible to seniors and the disabled.

IUEC has enjoyed relative labor
(Turn to Page 5)

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25