Historical Overview

The Beginning: Post WWII.

The IUE was born on November 2nd 1949, but its history can be traced back to 1933, when IUE's first President, James B. Carey, helped worker organizations in radio, manufacturing and related industries establish a national union, the National Radio and Allied Trades. That union became part of the historic Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO). Three years later, the radio group became the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers. Thirteen years later, in the midst of disputes about the direction of the Union, Carey broke away from the UE and formed a new union—IUE.

"IUE-CIO was born at the CIO’s Eleventh Constitutional Convention in Cleveland on November 2, 1949. We were born literally without any membership or treasury—with nothing except the loyalty and militancy of tens of thousands of electrical workers who had fought with us for years . . ." described IUE founder James B. Carey.

Described as a "Union in a hurry" by CIO President Phillip Murray, IUE, the International Union of Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers, grew from no members to more than 300,000 in three years. Within a year after its founding convention, IUE had adopted its first constitution, elected Carey president, and negotiated successful national contracts with General Motors, GE, and Westinghouse.

By the mid-1950s, IUE had emerged as the dominant industrial union representing workers in the electrical-electronics manufacturing sector, and by the late-1950s, IUE had over 400,000 members. IUE was, indeed, hurrying to make its mark on the labor movement.

Winning for the Members:

Though dedicated to achieving stable labor-management relations through collective bargaining, IUE has never cowered from hitting the streets when necessary.

In its 60-year history, IUE has waged many small strikes, and three strikes of national significance: Westinghouse in 1955-56 and the strikes against General Electric in 1960 and 1969. The 156-day Westinghouse strike—one of the longest national strikes in labor history—idled 55,000 members and closed down 35 plants from coast to coast.

The highly divisive GE strike of 1960 lasted nearly three weeks and involved 70,000 members. The 101-day 1969 strike was the final nail in the coffin for GE’s “take it or leave it” bargaining strategy, named Boulwarism after GE negotiator Lemuel Boulware.

In the 1960’s, at the suggestion of AFL-CIO President George Meany, IUE met with the presidents of five other international unions to discuss greater coordination around pension and insurance issues in the 1966 round of GE negotiations, and the CBC (Coordinated Bargaining Committee) was born. The following month, the unions decided to broaden the scope of the CBC to include the full range of bargaining issues. Over the years, coordinated collective bargaining helped IUE attain greater negotiating leverage, working with other unions to pool resources and information in the framing of bargaining demands at GE. Today, IUE-CWA President James D. Clark is the Chairman of the GE Coordinated Bargaining Committee.
Power to the People:

Over the past sixty years IUE has pursued an aggressive political agenda on behalf of its membership, and taken the lead in the civil rights and women's movements. From the shop floor to the bargaining table, from the picket lines to the halls of Congress, IUE has always stood up for what is fair, just, and right for working Americans and their families.

Through the years, IUE has orchestrated lobbying on behalf of civil rights and anti-poverty programs, equal employment opportunity, fair housing, education, national health care, pay equity, and trade reform. IUE has also been active in raising funds to help pro-worker candidates win office at local, state, and national levels. IUE remains committed to giving workers and working families a strong voice in the political process.

Mergers: The Dynamic IUE

Over the years, the IUE’s initial membership, which originally consisted primarily of electronic-electrical industry workers and manufacturing workers of consumer goods (appliances, televisions and radios) and heavy machinery, turbines and auto parts, grew to include furniture, optical and social workers, as well as public sector and salaried workers. In 1987, the United Furniture Workers of American merged with the IUE, creating the International Union of Electronic, Electrical, Salaried, Machine and Furniture Workers, AFL-CIO.

In 2000, facing a declining membership due to the “Race to the Bottom” increase of corporate outsourcing and off-shoring, which resulted in a tremendous loss of American manufacturing jobs, the IUE merged with the Communication Workers of America. The merger with CWA improved IUE’s ability to organize, increased clout at the bargaining table, and gave IUE financial security. While the longstanding IUE acronym became IUE-CWA, the IUE was able to maintain its identity and traditions as the Industrial Division of CWA.

IUE-CWA Today:

Despite a labor-hostile environment in the U.S., IUE-CWA continues to fight hard for members, while working with employers to keep manufacturing jobs in the U.S. Taking the lead with programs like Treasure Hunt (Energy savings) and our employee-centered LEAN program, IUE-CWA has established itself as a progressive union dedicated to making the renaissance of American manufacturing and American labor a reality. IUE-CWA continues to organize new members, including Service Contract Act employees working for government contractors. Understanding the importance of building strong coalitions, IUE-CWA has partnered with other social and political organizations and international trade unions to further the interests of American workers. The historical struggle of working men and women to attain social, political, and economic empowerment is not over, nor will it be over until every man and woman in the United States makes a truly living wage in a healthy and safe working environment. IUE-CWA remains strongly committed to that future. As generations of IUE workers have left a rich heritage of struggles fought and goals met, current IUE members push the fight on to improve the lives of future generations and to make tomorrow’s proud history.