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WINNING STRATEGY

California Local Negotiates Historic Raise for NASA Contract Workers

The largest negotiated salary increase in almost 75 years is heading to the paychecks of the more than 70 members of San Bernardino, Calif., Local 543, who operate and maintain equipment that keeps NASA in constant contact with its deep-space network of probes, telescopes and satellites.

The members work for NASA contractor Peraton at the Goldstone Deep Space Communications Complex, housed in the Mojave Desert at the U.S. Army's Fort Irwin.

The IBEW's presence at the base dates to the 1950s, when Local 543 was chartered to represent workers of the telephone company that served "everything on the east side of the Sierras," said Business Manager Jorge Lugo.

In 1963, NASA selected Fort Irwin for Goldstone, a key part of the agency's global network that now communicates with numerous spacecraft such as lunar and Martian orbiters and landers, the James Webb Space Telescope, and the two Voyager space probes.

Lugo, a 36-year member of the IBEW, said Local 543's highly trained members work on every Goldstone system.

"They not only take care of the giant radar dishes but also all the components that make them work, the high-voltage electric systems and equipment, and the hydraulics," he said. "It's impressive when you walk in the control room and realize what they're doing."

"Our job site is 52 square miles, but if an antenna's [malfunctioning], everybody's on it," said President John Muñoz, the bargaining unit's chief steward.

Local 543's executive board appointed Lugo business manager nearly seven months ago after his predecessor retired. The negotiations were Lugo's first.

"I went out to Goldstone when I first got the position and talked to as many people as I could," Lugo said.

When negotiations with Peraton began, "This was the time for me to prove my strategies and see what I can do," said Lugo, who added that he was grateful to have Muñoz and Rush by his side.

"I've negotiated a lot of contracts," said Rush, a longtime inside journeyman wireman from Riverside, Calif., Local 440. "But Jorge's local was a whole new realm from what I'm used to."

Rush said that he and Lugo, in turn, leaned heavily on Muñoz.

"John knows the contract, how it works and all the nuts and bolts of what [our members] need," Lugo added.

"I'm around the guys all the time," said Muñoz, who noted that this was his fourth negotiation with a NASA contractor. "I get to hear what everybody really wants."

What they wanted was a raise. "Peraton wasn't paying the market rate," Rush said. "They had a retention issue." Added Lugo: "Contractors on and off post were coming in and headhunting our members."



Local 543 members keep NASA's massive satellite dishes at Goldstone communicating with the agency's extra-terrestrial network of spacecraft and landers.



Pictured in Local 543 members' control room at NASA's Goldstone Deep Space Communications Complex are, from left, President John Muñoz, Scott Heck, Business Manager Jorge Lugo, Alex Mora, Joshua Baca and Joseph Rogers.

When contract negotiations began, Rush observed that the Peraton team knew it was Lugo's first time leading them. "I could see their attorneys were trying to take advantage of it and didn't agree to anything at first," he said.

Lugo and his team held their ground firmly. "We just went in there pushing what our people want," Muñoz said.

By the second day, the contractor's negotiators couldn't ignore Rush. "We started getting into the weeds, and when I started speaking up, the lawyers realized that I've done this a bit," he said. "I was countering what they were saying."

On Day 3, the Local 543 negotiators highlighted pay charts from other contractors on nearby military bases. "All your guys are getting pilfered," Lugo told Peraton's negotiating team. "If you don't step up, you're going to see more people defecting."

Peraton's proposal, Lugo said, was almost identical to what his team had been preparing. In the contract's first year, alongside a base bargaining unit raise of 3.5%, workers would gain access to higher classifications that, depending on position and other considerations, would mean additional first-year pay bumps between 4.2% and 12.4%.

"At the end of the day, I think our goals were met," Lugo said. The members agreed, ratifying the agreement soon afterward.

"Jorge and his negotiating team did a great job for Local 543's members," said Ninth District International Vice President Dave Reaves. "It's a good reminder to all of us that federal installations and military bases across North America present lots of organizing opportunities for the IBEW."

MILESTONE

IBEW Reaches Tentative Agreements with CSX, Norfolk Southern, BNSF Rail Carriers

The IBEW reached tentative agreements with three major railroads in October, negotiating a historic raise along with improvements to paid time off and health benefits.

"These new agreements are a historic step forward for rail workers across the nation, and I'm proud of the efforts of IBEW railroad members in helping secure a fair deal," said IBEW International President Kenneth W. Cooper. "Our workers help move America, and this agreement recognizes the value they bring to the rail industry."

Five-year deals were reached with CSX, Norfolk Southern and BNSF. The agreements would provide a compounded wage increase of 18.77%, allow members to use vacation time earlier and give workers the option to carry over up to four unused paid sick days a year. Employees would also be able to cash out any unused days at 100% if they leave service.

While the agreements are largely in line with industry norms, Railroad Director Al Russo noted that the ability to accrue up to 20 sick days is specific to the IBEW agreements.

"We felt we needed to do something more for our members," Russo said.

The wage increase is also the largest achieved without any federal intervention, something railroad contracts are often subject to.

"It's a good deal," said Jeff Allred, Railroad System Council general chair for BNSF workers, noting that the raises are "frontloaded" to provide the largest increase in the first years of the contract.

The agreements, which cover roughly 2,500 members, represent offers that are largely consistent across the rail properties, and if passed would keep IBEW members in line with other workers, said Tom Owens,



The roughly 2,500 CSX, Norfolk Southern and BNSF members would get wage increases, the ability to use vacation time earlier and the option of carrying over up to four paid sick days a year.

Railroad System Council general chair representing workers at CSX and Norfolk Southern.

"This way, our members have the final decision," he said. "It puts the power in their hands."

IBEW rail members work in a variety of roles, including locomotive service maintenance, bridge and building work, radio maintenance, automatic train control, and telecommunications.