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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 1990, a study was conducted of local unions in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Region 9 with market recovery programs (MRPs) designed to reverse declines in union membership. Three locals were chosen for in-depth study in Las Vegas, Nevada; Oakland, California; and Portland, Oregon. The locals reflected the diversity in the IBEW locals in the region. An attitude survey was developed to measure members' reaction to the MRP experiment. Of 3,786 mailed questionnaires, 1,237 responses were received. Findings indicated that the members had a generally positive attitude toward the MRP. On a scale from 20 to 110, the average composite score was 74. Despite some variance from local to local, the program was generally accepted by members in all three locals. Generally speaking, the younger members viewed the program less positively than older members. The "old guard" or the established officers of two of the locals who were thrown out of office by MRP reformers were a pocket of resistance toward the program. Finally, the more people worked on the program, the more they liked it. (YLB)

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## WORKPLACE INNOVATION AND LOCAL UNIONS IN THE BUILDING TRADES: THEORY, APPLICATION AND MEMBERSHIP REACTIONS

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WP-014  
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**Abstract:** This paper examines a "grass roots" experiment in workplace innovation pioneered by a number of local unions in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). These experimental programs involve the subsidization of union electrical contractors by local unions to enable them to more effectively compete in competitive bidding against non-union contractors. Special attention is given in this paper to the attitudes of union members who provide the funds to make this subsidy possible.

## I. Background

The Building and Construction trades have long been regarded as the bastion of trade union strength and influence in the United States. Once regarded as the "aristocrats of labor", the union craftsmen in the construction industry provided the conceptual orientation to workplace bargaining and local union autonomy that is credited as the key to the preservation of the American Federation of Labor in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>1</sup> Even today, the unions in the building and construction trades are seen as having a considerable influence on the orientation and philosophy of the labor movement in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

The influence and power of unions in the building and construction trades in the decade of the 1990's is significantly diminished from what is had been in the 60's and 70's, however. The decade of the 1980's saw a steady decline in the numbers of members in the twelve unions traditionally associated with the construction industry. Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate this decline and show that every single national union in the construction industry experienced membership decline during the first seven years of the 80's. Furthermore, the percentage of the total labor force unionized in construction has declined from about 33 percent in 1980 to an estimated 19.5 percent in 1988. The trend in union membership decline is not expected to reverse itself, even though total employment in the construction industry is expected to increase by 1.2% and the dollar value of output to expand 2.1 percent between the years 1990 and 2000.<sup>3</sup> The decline of union membership in the building trades is even more puzzling given the fact that the industry is

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<sup>1</sup> Selig Perlman A Theory of the Labor Movement. New York. Augustus M. Kelley. 1949 p. 200-208.

<sup>2</sup> Marcus Hart Sandver, Labor Relations Process and Outcomes, Little, Brown and Co. Boston, 1987, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Valerie Personick "Industry Output and Employment: A Slower Trend for the Nineties" Monthly Labor Review, November 1989, p. 25-41.

Table 1

## Membership in Major Building Trades Unions

Union	1980	1987	% Change
Bricklayers	135,000	102,000	-24.4
Carpenters	784,035	609,000	-22.3
Electrical Workers	1,041,408	790,000	-23.9
Ironworkers	183,623	135,000	-26.5
Laborers	608,000	371,000	-38.9
Operating Engineers	422,680	320,000	-24.3
Painters	164,000	128,000	-22.0
Plasterers	50,000	43,000	-14.0
Plumbers	351,584	330,000	- 6.1
Roofers	32,249	25,573	-20.7
Sheet Metal Workers	161,210	150,000	- 6.9
Tile Setters	<u>9,000</u>	<u>8,000</u>	<u>-11.1</u>
Total	3,942,789	3,011,573	-23.6

Table 2

## Construction Industry Union Representation

	1980	1985	1988
Total Employment	4,800,000	4,500,000	5,125,000
Union Membership	1,600,000	1,061,000	1,000,000(est.)
Percentage Representation	33.1	23.5	19.5(est.)

Source: Courtney Gifford Directory of U.S. Labor Organizations 1988-89 Edition. p. 1-99

dominated by local product and labor markets and that the production process makes construction an industry virtually invulnerable to foreign competition.

Why has union membership been declining in this industry where employment generally has been expanding and where prospects for the future are so rosy? There are a variety of alternative hypotheses to explain this phenomenon. The argument might be made that technological displacement is occurring and that automation is replacing skilled craftspersons with non-skilled machinery operatives. A rival hypotheses may be that structural shifts in the U.S. population has led to an expansion in the industry in the south and west (areas of union weakness) and away from the north and east (areas of union strength) leading to a gradual erosion in union employment.

Two recent academic studies have shed considerable light on this issue. In a recent paper presented by Steven Bronars and Donald Deere sponsored by the National Bureau of Economic Research the authors found that 65 percent of the decline in the membership of the building trades unions is attributable to growth in the non-union sector.<sup>4</sup> Similar results were reported by Professor Steven Allen who found that "a key factor (in the drop of construction industry union memberships) is the rising share of union members working for non-union contractors."<sup>5</sup> Allen estimates that 30 percent of all union members in the construction industry were working on non-union jobs in 1973 and that the figure had risen to 46 percent by 1981. Northrup's survey of open shop contractors in 1982 indicates that the level may be 60 percent or higher.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Decline of Unionization of Private Sector Workforce" Labor Relations Reporter, Vol. 132, p. 527. December 25, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Steven G. Allen "Declining Unionization in Construction: The Facts and The Reasons." Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Vol. 41, No. 3, (April 1988) p. 358.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert R. Northrup Open Shop Construction Revisited, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984, p. 575-580.

## II. The Market Recovery Concept

In an attempt to reverse the trend of decreasing membership share in the construction labor force, several local unions in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers began experimenting with what are now called "Market Recovery Programs." The first market recovery program project was begun in late 1984 at IBEW Local 714 in Minot, North Dakota.<sup>7</sup> The original plan was adapted in early 1985 by IBEW Local 124 in Kansas City and market recovery programs of this type became known as "Kansas City Plans." In January of 1986 a new variant of the market recovery plan known as the "Elgin Plan" was adopted at IBEW Local 117 in Elgin, Illinois. Generally speaking, the difference between "Kansas City Plans" and "Elgin Plans" are that under the Kansas City Plan the program has no permanent fund and the local union subsidizes the wages of local union members directly on a "pay as you go" basis. Under the "Elgin Plan" a permanent fund is created, financed by an assessment on the members wages, and the subsidy is paid not to the members but directly to the contractor. Under the Elgin Plan the local union Business Manager makes a determination, with the representatives of the local contractors association, as to the amount of wage subsidy necessary to enable the union contractors to compete effectively with non-union contractors on a particular job. The subsidy may be as high as \$10 per hour for every person hour worked on a particular job. Under the Elgin Plan the subsidy is paid directly to the successful union contractor who wins a competitive contract away from a non-union or open shop contractor. In some instances (known as Elgin II Plans), the subsidy is paid directly to the developer or the general contractor rather than to the electrical sub-contractor.

The exact number of IBEW local unions who have instituted market recovery programs is not known. The best estimate of the prevalence of these plans is provided by the IBEW

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Metzger "Buying the Job" in Mark Ehrlich and Jeff Grabelsky (eds.) Labor Research Review, Vol. VII, No. 2 (Fall 1988) p. 54.

headquarters in Washington which is able to document that 79 local unions have amended their by-laws to provide for the expenditure of member's dues monies for market recovery purposes.<sup>8</sup> The IBEW data further reveal that over 85 percent of the market recovery programs on record are either Elgin I or Elgin II Plans (permanent fund plans) and that 33 of the 79 plans are in the IBEW's 9th region which includes the states of California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Hawaii and Alaska. The state of California alone has 26 IBEW local unions with Market Recovery Programs, more than any other state. By way of contrast, there are no IBEW locals with Market Recovery Programs east of Wheeling, West Virginia. The negotiation and administration of market recovery plans is surely a matter of local option, and is largely ignored by the International Union.

### III. The Present Study

In the spring of 1990 the authors received permission from the Vice President of IBEW Region 9, Mr. S.R. McCann, to conduct a study of the local unions in his region with Market Recovery Programs; 33 of the 39 locals in this region had an MRP. Three locals were chosen for in depth study; Local 357 in Las Vegas, Nevada, Local 595 in Oakland, California and Local 48 in Portland, Oregon. The locals were chosen to reflect the diversity in the IBEW locals in the region. For example, Local 357 is a rapidly growing local with a young vigorous business oriented leadership and has a mix of private sector and public sector contractors (mostly defense contractors at the Henderson, Nevada nuclear test site). Local 595 in Oakland is an old established local with a slowly declining membership and is led by the longest serving business manager of any IBEW local in the country. Local 48 in Portland is a local union whose membership has declined over the past few years, but the decline has been consciously managed and planned by the business manager in a somewhat radical attempt to consolidate the local's

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<sup>8</sup> Personal Conversation with Mr. Bud Fisher, Director of Division of Construction, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Washington, D.C., November 16, 1991.

strength in certain strategic segments of the local construction industry. Descriptive information on each of these local unions and their market recovery programs is given in Table 3.

As the data in Table 3 show, the market recovery programs seem to have the effect of increasing or at least maintaining the union contractors share of the market for commercial electrical work. Remember, that in most segments of the industry the unions market share has been steadily declining. Further note, the tremendous amount of money generated by the MRP's into the union treasury. As was mentioned earlier, the MRP's used by each of these locals is an Elgin I Plan, meaning that the wage subsidy is paid directly by the local union to the contractor, and then paid by the contractor to his or her employees as wages at the union scale. Under such a plan a union electrical contractor can bid a construction project at the non-union wage rate thus "taking wages out of competition" in the bid process and eliminating the cost advantage of the non-union bidder. In theory, the union contractors productivity advantage gained by employing union trained tradespersons will enable him or her to eventually drive the non-union competitors out of the market.<sup>9</sup> Once the market has been recovered, and when union contractors again dominate the commercial electrical business, the need for the MRP will end.

Of course, such a characterization of the market recovery process is in a way overly simplistic. The oversimplification comes from the fact that a critical variant in the process is overlooked; namely the interests and attitudes of the people who fund these MRP experiments, the local union members. What the MRP really amounts to is a negotiated wage concession collected by the local union officers from the members and then redistributed to the contractors in the form of subsidies. In some cases, particularly where the local union members work on "Davis-Bacon" jobs, the subsidy flows from those working on publicly funded projects to those working on privately funded jobs. Likewise for locals with a large number of members working on

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<sup>9</sup> See Steven Allen "Unionization and Productivity in Office Building and School Construction" Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Jan. 1986) p. 187-201 for an elaboration of the productivity advantage.

Table 3

	Local 357 Las Vegas, NV	Local 595 Oakland, CA	Local 48 Portland, OR
Began MRP	Feb. 1987	Oct. 1987	Jan. 1986
Members - Today	1593	1410	1451
Members - 1985 (est.)	1100	1420	1950
Union Share of Commercial Electrical Market (today)	64%	60%	74%
Union Share of Commercial Electrical Market 1987	38%	60%	39%
Union Wage Rate (includes fringes)	27.98	28.78	25.85
Dues to MRP (per person hour)	\$.42 (1.5%)	\$.86 (3%)	\$.89 (3.5%)
MRP Funds Collected to date	\$4,110,000	\$5,950,000	\$12,400,000
Projects Funded	180	310	1524
Total Wages Earned by Members - MRP	\$7,130,000	\$14,900,000	\$31,400,000

SOURCE: Annual reports provided by each local union to the authors.

"permanent" or "inside crew" types of jobs (where the employment relationship is relatively long-term) the subsidy flows from these workers to those operating in a more casual or intermittent employment relationship. To say the least, the prospect for rivalry, dissention, jealousy and financial mayhem in the MRP locals is great. If there ever was a concept to test the limits of "union brotherhood" or "labor solidarity" the MRP experiment is it.

#### IV. The Attitude Survey

In cooperation with all three local union business managers, an attitude survey was developed to measure the members' reaction to the MRP experiment. No formal measure of the attitudes of the members toward the MRP had ever been attempted in any of these local unions. Discussion of the MRP at local union meetings did not fit the standard of formal attitude assessment in the view of the authors or local union officials.<sup>10</sup>

The survey was devised by the authors, pretested, and mailed to the home address of every resident status member of every local. After subtracting the bad addresses from the files, 3786 questionnaires were successfully mailed and delivered. In total 1237 responses were received for a response rate of 32.7 percent. The descriptive results from the attitude survey are given in table 4. It can be seen from Table 4 that there are differences in the responses from each of the three locals in both ethnicity, hours worked, participation in the affairs of the local unions, and hours worked on MRP jobs. It is important to note that for each of the three locals the responding members reported a sizeable involvement in MRP jobs. In Oakland, for example, the average respondent reported working 558 hours of his or her total employment in 1989 (1666 hours) for an average of 33.5 percent. That is, 33 1/2 percent of the average respondents total hours in 1989 were spent on MRP funded jobs.

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<sup>10</sup> Attendance rarely if ever exceeded 10% of membership at any monthly meeting of any of the locals.

Table 4  
MRP Questionnaire Results

	<u>Portland</u>	<u>Oakland</u>	<u>Las Vegas</u>	<u>All</u>
Mailed	1390	1160	1235	3786
Received	499	326	412	1237
Response Rate	35.9	28.1	33.4	32.7
Journeyman/Apprentice	90/10	92/8	95/5	92.5/7.5
Sex M/F	98/2	96/4	97/3	97/3
Age 40 and under (%)	46.5	41.7	40.1	42.9
Ethnicity White	96	82.4	90	90.5
Hispanic	.4	5.6	2	2.2
Black	1.1	2.5	3	2.3
Native American	.6	3.1	4	2.3
Asian	1.3	4.6	.3	1.7
Other	.6	2	1	1.1
Ed. 13 years or more (%)	83.0	82.7	74.9	82
Apprentice Completer (%)	83.1	86.8	75.6	81.3
IBEW Member - years	15.9	19.5	19	17.9
Local Member - years	14.5	18.8	12.6	15.1
Hours Worked 1989	1881	1666	1749	1784
Hours Worked 1990	1900	1651	1714	1776
Ever Held Office - (yes %)	3.7	4.0	7	5
Meetings Attended (year)	3.0	3.3	8.3	4.8
Active in Local - (yes %)	26	28.5	54	36.3
Worked on MRP - (yes %)	60.5	58.6	36	51.8
MRP Hours - 1989	390	558	330	428
MRP Hours - 1990	337	617	223	382
Composite Score	69.7	79.5	75.1	74.0
Std. Dev.	18.1	14.4	18.4	17.8

	<u>Portland</u>	<u>Oakland</u>	<u>Las Vegas</u>	<u>All</u>
1. MRP Successful in 1989	A-61.2 N-20.2 D-18.6	A-71.6 N-19.9 D- 8.7	A-65.3 N-18.3 D-16.4	A-65.5 N-19.5 D-14.9
2. MRP Recovers Lost Jobs	A-75.1 N- 9.5 D-17.5	A-80.5 N-13.0 D- 6.9	A-74.3 N-11.3 D-14.3	A-75.3 N-11. D-14.6
3. MRP Beneficial to Local	A-73.0 N-12.3 D-15.4	A-79.7 N-14.4 D- 5.9	A-71.2 N-12.7 D-15.2	A-74.1 N-13.2 D-12.7
4. IBEW and NECA Should work Together	A-90.9 N- 6.2 D- 2.9	A-96.1 N- 2.3 D- 1.6	A-95.4 N- 3.8 D- .8	A-93.8 N- 4.3 D- 1.8
5. Employers Concerned	A-56.6 N-21.3 D-22.1	A-62.4 N-20.1 D-17.5	A-43.6 N-25.6 D-30.7	A-53.8 N-22.5 D-23.9
6. MRP not worth costs	A-30.0 N-22.0 D-48.0	A-15.1 N-26.7 D-58.2	A-21.5 N-20.3 D-58.1	A-23.2 N-22.4 D-54.4
7. MRP Should be expanded	A-10.8 N-22.7 D-66.4	A-37.3 N-38.0 D-24.7	A-31.5 N-27.5 D-41.0	A-24.8 N-28. D-47.1
8. More money to MRP	A- 3.4 N-13.0 D-83.6	A-15.6 N-34.2 D-51.3	A-10.2 N-28.0 D-61.9	A- 8.5 N-23.6 D-67.9
9. MRP pay by others	A-53.2 N-25.4 D-21.3	A-63.2 N-26.9 D- 9.9	A-61.2 N-21.1 D-17.8	A-58.5 N-24.5 D-17.0
10. MRP Pay by others	A-17.0 N-30.0 D-53.0	A- 9.6 N-30.2 D-60.2	A-10.1 N-27.6 D-62.4	A-12.5 N-29.6 D-58.0
11. Members Support MRP	A-35.7 N-31.1 D-33.2	A-57.0 N-31.1 D-12.0	A-48.1 N-24.9 D-27.1	A-45.4 N-28.9 D-25.6
12. MRP Brings Higher Wages	A-23.0 N-26.5 D-50.5	A-23.4 N-33.8 D-42.9	A-30.5 N-26.5 D-43.1	A-25.6 N-28.4 D-46.0
13. MRP Should Continue	A-51.1 N-18.3 D-30.6	A-72.7 N-18.4 D- 8.9	A-60.8 N-17.5 D-21.8	A-60.3 N-17.9 D-21.8
14. Composite Score (Range from 20 [most negative] to 100 [most positive])	69.7 (Std. Deve. 18.1)	79.5 (14.4)	75.1 (18.4)	74.0 (17.8)

The responses to the questions themselves were collapsed into a composite scale with a minimum score of 20, indicating all negative responses to the attitude survey, and a score of 110, indicating all positive responses to the attitude survey. The next step was to correlate each measure of demographics, employment history, local union participation and MRP participation with the composite score; these results are given in Table 5.

The results in Table 5 reveal an interesting relationship between general orientation of the members to the MRP experiment in their local union and their individual characteristics. For example, generally speaking age is negatively correlated with the members attitudes towards workplace innovation.

The younger members (those under 40 coded as a dummy variable) generally have less positive attitudes towards the MRP than do older members (with the exception of the local in Las Vegas). This relationship between age and attitudes regarding the MRP is born out by the positive correlation between length of membership in the union and attitudes toward the MRP. In this case, generally speaking, the more senior members of the union have more positive attitudes towards the MRP than do the junior members. Interestingly, in Portland and Las Vegas those persons who identified themselves as former officers of the union had significantly greater positive attitudes toward the MRP than did other members, with a mean score of 82. This result is easily explained by the fact that in Portland and Las Vegas the MRP was instituted by new young "radical" officers who took over from the established leadership and initiated the MRP as part of a reform package in the administration of the local. Their mean score was a high 87.

The last group of variables that are significantly associated with attitudes toward the MRP are variables that measure members experience with the MRP program. Generally speaking, those people who have worked on MRP jobs have more positive attitudes about the program than those that haven't. In addition, the more the members work on these jobs (measured by hours per year) the more they like them.

Table 5. Zero Order Correlations between Workplace Innovation Attitude Score and Explanatory Variables

Variable	Portland	Oakland	Las Vegas	All
Journeyman Status	-.0237	.0836	.0131	.0230
Sex (M)	-.0105	.0379	-.0363	-.0215
Age (40 and under)	-.1077*	-.1695**	.0182	-.0897**
Race	-.0330	-.0102	.0186	-.0463
Education	.0121	-.0191	-.0009	.0000
Apprentice Completer	.0184	-.0231	-.1347**	-.0480
IBEW - Member (Yrs.)	.0847	.1862**	-.1034*	.0617*
Local Member (Yrs.)	.0858	.2049**	-.0988	.0771*
Hours Worked 1989	.0436	.0273	.0013	-.0197
Hours Worked 1990	.0653	.0024	.1510	.0032
Former Officer	-.1371**	.0262	-.1602**	-.1138**
Meetings Attended	.0479	-.0900	.0591	.0412
Active in Local	.0832	-.0567	.0435	.0476
Worked on MRP	.1080*	.1010	.2174**	.1253**
MRP Hours 1989	.1810**	.2834**	.1821**	.2192**
MRP Hours 1990	.2162**	.1526	.2991**	.2073**
n	499	326	412	1237

\* = significant at .05 level

\*\* = significant at .01 level

To carry the analysis one step further, the explanatory variables were regressed on the dependent variable (composite score towards MRP) and the results are reported in Table 6. The results in Table 6 are similar to those in Table 5. Holding all else constant, these members under 40 years of age have less favorable attitudes toward the market recovery concept than do older members. Generally speaking, the former and current officers of the locals have more favorable attitudes toward MRP than other members. As in Table 5., the results showed that those who have worked on MRP funded projects have more favorable attitudes toward the programs than other members, and the more hours they worked, the more they liked the program.

#### V. Conclusions

We feel the results from this paper are significant for a number of reasons. First of all, this paper reports on an innovative program initiated by several local unions in the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers to regain market share lost to non-union contractors. The Market Recovery Program is a controversial, yet effective, way to regain work for union electricians that is controlled and maintained by the union. The program is maintained by a "check-off" of the union members' dues; in some of the locals the contribution per member is a substantial amount of money (about \$1500 per member per year in Portland). The results do show, however, that the money is well spent and that the unions share of the local labor market is gaining, or at least maintaining status-quo.

The second important result from the paper is to show that generally the members have a positive attitude toward the MRP. On a scale from 20 to 110, the average composite score is 74. The arithmetic mean of the range from 20 to 110 is 65, so generally speaking the members of these three locals view the MRP positively. There is some variance from local to local (the program is more popular in Oakland, least popular in Portland), but generally the program is accepted by the members in all three locals.

Table 6. Multiple Regression between Workplace Innovation Attitude Score and Explanatory Variables

Variable	Portland	Oakland	Las Vegas	All
Journeyman Status	-.027	.015	-.008	.012
Sex (M)	-.022	.001	-.038	-.024
Age (40 and under)	-5.71**	-.041	-.005	-3.90**
Race	-.032	-.050	.029	-.045
Education	.038	.015	-.036	.007
Apprentice Completer	.015	-.019	-4.64**	-.043
IBEW - Member (Yrs.)	.004	-.336	-.056	-.007
Local Member (Yrs.)	.060	.269**	-.078	.023
Hours Worked 1989	.009	.005	.045	-.016
Hours Worked 1990	.004*	-.006	.055	.010
Former Officer	-11.85**	.061	-11.82**	-8.22**
Meetings Attended	.027	-.008	.011	.022
Active in Local	.017	-.032	.009	.035
Worked on MRP	4.21**	3.30*	7.17**	4.43**
MRP Hours 1989	.009	.006**	.022	.005**
MRP Hours 1990	.007**	.057	.011**	.003**
n	499	326	412	1237
R	.07	.08	.10	.06
F	7.08**	10.43**	12.83**	15.86**

\* = significant at .05 level

\*\* = significant at .01 level

The final result from the research is to identify the correlates or determinants of the variance in members' attitudes. Generally speaking, younger members view the program less positively than older members, perhaps reflecting more of an instrumental attitude toward the union and the program among younger members (remember, the program is paid directly out of the members' pay check). Secondly, the "old guard" or the established officers of two of the locals who were thrown out of office by MRP reformers are a pocket of resistance toward the program. Finally, the more people work on the program the more they like it. The implications of this are that the local union officers need to ensure that the opportunities for working on MRP jobs are evenly distributed among the members to enhance popularity.

The descriptive and analytic results of the research show that Market Recovery Programs have a bright future for local union business agents who are bold enough to start them. It is interesting to contrast the innovation and creativity of the local union business agents in the I.B.E.W. in the western states with the conservativeness and reserve of those in the East. As the membership of more and more local unions in the eastern districts slides farther and farther it will be interesting to watch the choices made by the leaders and members. Will the membership crisis motivate experimentation, or will it paralyze the leaders into inaction and eventual extinction?

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