

ASK THE GENERAL PRESIDENT

As always, I'm happy and ready to answer any questions you may have about the union, no matter how tough they may be. In this edition of "Ask the General President," the pension plan is on many, many minds.

Q Can someone tell me how our pension fund is doing? Not the International Pension Plan—my local plan.

A Well, this is a tough question for me to answer. You see, the jurisdiction of a local pension plan is just like that of the International Pension Plan: The plan's trustees are the fiduciaries. What does that mean, exactly? It means that the trustees, and the trustees alone, control the terms of the pension plan. Even if the International wanted to tell a district council or local union how to run their plan (which we absolutely don't), we couldn't. So, I can't report out to you on your Plan's status. You'll need to contact your district council leadership for that.

However, you need to understand that there weren't too many pension

funds that performed well in 2008. Our economy is the victim of global terrorism and irresponsible banking practices. It was a one-two punch that's going to require a lot of time and patience until we recover from it. I realize that's a tall order for those members who are close to retirement, but it's the only option we have. So remember: If your plan has suffered losses, it's not fair to put the full blame on your business manager or administrator.

Back when I was running my district council, a member came up to me after a meeting and told me that I was doing a poor job of investing our pension fund money. He was pretty irate about it, as a matter of fact. I told him that I didn't make those decisions but, rather, approved them based on the advice of the professionals we hired to make such decisions. I then asked him where he invested his own money. He

told me he didn't have any investments and then quickly added that, again, we should have done better.

I realize that everyone's nerves are frayed over this economy, especially when it comes to retirement security. However, please keep in mind that your leadership only wants the best for the membership. So, let's be fair and get the facts straight before we assign blame for a pension plan that's suffered losses.

Q I just got off the phone with the Pension Fund office and wanted to say "thank you" to James Bogart and Farrah Byrd for the excellent service.

These days, we have foreign call centers and support people who don't seem to have any answers. It's almost as if phone centers are designed today to intentionally get callers "lost in the shuffle." It was a joy to call your (my) Pension office and get swift,

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GENERAL PRESIDENT**



clear answers to my questions from friendly staff.

I spoke with two people, who were both courteous and informed. It says quite a bit about the organization when the “frontline” pension office workers are that professional and efficient.

Thank you!

A We know that, when a person calls about his or her pension, we have to be ready to answer their questions with efficiency and respect. These are worrisome days for many of us, and our members and participants deserve only the best in service when they call on us.

Q Why should laid-off union painters have to pay monthly dues when they can't even afford to put food on their tables? What do you really do for us?

A The last thing your leadership wants to do is force you to decide between groceries and being in the union. So, we addressed this dues concern at the last General President's Advisory Committee in March. The business manager/secretary-treasurers of the IUPAT unanimously voted to create a new classification of membership called Solidarity Status. Those out of work for a designated amount of time may apply for this status, which allows them to remain a member in good standing at a greatly reduced dues amount. Once the member finds employment, the status reverts back to regular membership. Contact your district council to learn more.



Q I left Phoenix for Las Vegas in 1989, after 20 years in the painting trade and dead broke. I joined IUPAT Local Union 159 at the age of 47 and, 20 years later, I'm now collecting my pension. My daughter and her husband recently lost their jobs and will be forced to move into my home with their two daughters. My ability to help support them financially at this stage in my life is all due to my participation in the union. I may not understand or agree with everything the union does, but I have no idea where I would be today if I [hadn't] become a member.

So, with humility and gratitude, I want to thank you for all the union has done for me and my family. Small words, but they come with great appreciation for the benefits I've enjoyed as a member of Local Union 159. So, once again, thank you for all the hard work you and so many others do every day.

A Thanks for your letter, and I hope things work out soon for your daughter and her husband. We're hearing more and more stories like this, where grown children are forced to move back home because

of this economy. It makes me proud to know that, because of this union, our members are better prepared to handle situations like this.

Q Where does the money go from the advertisement space bought in the Painters and Allied Trades Journal?

A Great question. We take the ad revenue from the *Journal* and use it to pay for a portion of the magazine itself. It's been a great cost-cutting measure for us, and making the change in our constitution at our last general convention to allow advertising was one of the best things we ever did for our members. It cut the average cost of printing the magazine by more than 15 percent.

Q I read about the STAR program in the Journal and my district council doesn't have it. Why is that?

A The Safety Training Awards Recognition Program, or STAR, was created by the Labor Management Cooperation Initiative (LMCI) almost five years ago. It was designed to create a “culture of safety” on the jobsite by rewarding our members for taking advanced safety classes. It's been a great success in

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many, many district councils, but it is ultimately up to the local leadership to implement the program. We totally encourage the STAR program and applaud the district councils that have already implemented it. Talk to your business manager about volunteering to create a STAR committee.

Q I have been a commercial painter for 25 years. I used to do a lot of repaint work, but not anymore. Local leadership tells me that we can't get it and not to worry about it, but I do worry about it.

A Well, you're right. It's worth worrying about because, unlike other trades, when we build these buildings, we have the opportunity to work on them again and again, doing repaint work, putting down new carpet, doing drywall finishing, and doing glass work. Your International is working with the district councils to remain competitive for jobs like this. We cannot let opportunities like these pass us by, especially in this economy. Thanks for the question.

Q I am a 15-year industrial painter who runs work for a large painting contractor. With all the government monies going into the stimulus package for bridge painting, highway transit, energy and power, is our union ready for this opportunity? I'm with a unit that travels for work and many times we have some problems getting qualified industrial painters.

A We have done several things to make ourselves ready for what we project to be a very busy future in industrial painting. First, we've briefed our district councils on what work opportunities are ahead of them in their local areas for industrial

painting and when they can expect that work to happen. Second, we've been developing a specific career/training program for industrial painters so we can more readily create this specialized workforce. Third, we continue to maintain and grow a traveling journey worker database. Industrial painters willing to travel for work can register their name on this list by visiting www.IUPAT.org and clicking on the traveling journey person link.

Q Why can't I just vote for only my local's business agent in the district council elections? I'm a drywall finisher, I don't know anything about the guys in glazing or sign painting and which BA to voted for in those crafts.

A In the last 14 years, we have been working on our restructuring through the full affiliation process. We've made this a top priority for our union because we want to make certain all of our crafts our represented in leadership.

For example, we have 10 drywall locals in the union that represent 6,434 drywall finishing members. The rest of our drywall finishers are represented by what we call "mixed locals." We have even fewer floor covering and sign and display locals, yet they deserve to be represented

as well. The reason we've been able to fend off raids from other unions, particularly in drywall finishing, is that we've held a united front on the job site. There was a day when the painters didn't know the glaziers and vice-versa on the job; today, it's a far different story and if someone attacks just one of our crafts on a job, they hear back from all of us.

Take a look at some of the videos on our IUPAT Channel 1 at www.IUPAT.org. You'll see some good examples of what a united front can accomplish.



Thanks to everyone for your questions. Keep them coming! Use the enclosed card to mail them to me or e-mail me at askthegeneralpresident@iupat.org.