

# Union Staffing Demands Dim Market for Solar Panels

By KEVIN DAYTON

**N**EW technology and generous government incentives have given Californians unprecedented opportunity to tap solar power for electricity. Unfortunately, one special interest group, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, seeks to block solar policies and projects.

In 2005, when the state Legislature first considered Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's "Million Solar Roofs" initiative, the IBEW demanded that contractors performing electrical-related work on solar projects must be licensed electrical contractors. No one ever testified in committee as to why licensed specialized solar contractors could not perform the work. Few of those contractors are unionized, while many electrical contractors are. The demand was a union grab for market share, but the union was not satisfied with just the licensing restrictions.

The IBEW demanded another amendment defining solar installation on private commercial and industrial projects as "public works" construction requiring so-called prevailing wages and the use of apprentices. This definition would have made solar installation too expensive for most private businesses, but the IBEW didn't care. If they couldn't get the work at inflated wage levels, they didn't want anyone to get it.

Frustrated by the unending demands, the Legislature ultimately circumvented the IBEW lobbyists by turning the Million Solar Roofs bill into simple changes in state law necessary to implement a solar incentive program developed by the California Public Utilities Commission. The IBEW then shifted its focus to that commission, where it argued that only the California State License Board can determine which types of contractor license are suitable for solar installation work. The chairman of the license board at that time was a construction union official.

## Manipulating policies

Meanwhile, the IBEW was manipulating solar policies on the local level. In September 2005, the IBEW tried, but failed, to convince the City of San Diego's Sustainable Energy Advisory Board to recommend a requirement



**Shine On:** A solar panel installation at Microsoft Corp.'s offices in Mountain View. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers is blocking solar projects while it pushes for requirements that licensed electrical contractors get some of the work.

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that solar installation contractors for city-funded projects use apprentices from state-approved electrical apprenticeship programs. In April 2007, the Los Angeles Board of Public Works amended its union-backed electrician ordinance to include solar work.

In both cases, the unions carried out a self-interested strategy to divert work from solar installers to large unionized electrical contractors. More recently, the IBEW and other unions have simply tried to block the permits for specific solar power projects until the developers agree to use only union workers through a Project Labor Agreement.

In July, the IBEW brought before the Fresno City Council a baseless appeal of the City Council's approval of a two-megawatt solar

panel system to supply energy to Fresno International Airport. This would be the largest solar project in the country associated with an airport. Cynically, the appeal was based on allegedly inadequate environmental review of the proposed solar project.

Also in July, a union-funded organization called California Unions for Reliable Energy filed a 62-page, 153-question data request with the California Energy Commission related to alleged environmental issues concerning a solar hybrid power plant planned to be built in Victorville. While this data request could significantly slow down the state's permitting process for the solar hybrid plant, a commitment from the city of Victorville to sign a union-only Project Labor Agreement for construction of the

plant would likely resolve most of the phony environmental concerns and allow the licensing of the plant to move forward.

The IBEW is the first and only organization in California to find staggering environmental problems with solar power. If the union can't monopolize the construction of solar facilities it seeks to obstruct solar energy opportunities for everybody else. Legislators and other public officials should not allow the IBEW to cast a shadow on this clean, abundant resource.

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