



# Rachel Bryan

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## ***“Why not pay a mother like we would pay a man?”***

Journeyman electrician on breaking down barriers for women and people of color in the building and construction trades

*Before joining the staff of IBEW Local 595 as a community liaison, Rachel Bryan was a journeyman electrician. The young trailblazer started off as a pre-apprentice and then moved on to a five-year apprenticeship program where she was the first pre-apprentice graduate to complete the electrical apprenticeship in Alameda County. During her time as an apprentice, she worked for six different contractors on projects throughout California. Her most memorable project to date, she says, was her work at Eden Medical Center in Castro Valley, California, where she had the opportunity to work with six other women, including a female general foreman who ran the project. The project showed her the importance of having female comrades on the job and made her understand the importance of attracting and retaining women, especially women of color, in the trades and in unions. This directly influences her current work as a community liaison at the IBEW.*

*Bryan dedicates her time to ensuring that women, people of color and young workers gain access, as she did, to family-supporting careers in the trades. And she works toward getting the trades to fully include these workers who have historically been left out of such career paths.*

*Bryan is also a committed activist in and outside of her union. She is an active participant and leader in her local labor council, the Electrical Workers Minority Caucus, and the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), where she represents the interests of young people on the Young Workers Advisory Council. She also works closely with numerous community groups and is an active member of her church.*

I'm a journeyman electrician with IBEW and currently work for them as a community liaison. Being a journeyman electrician means that I completed five years of training to get state certified to practice as an electrician, installing power systems, lighting systems, heating systems, audio-visual systems, and fire alarms.

I had an interesting path here. For five years, I ran from bad decisions and their consequences. Finally, I saved enough money to get a lawyer, and I turned myself in to the police. I spent 40

I went to a pre-apprenticeship program for sixteen weeks and completed that program. I was their first graduate to complete the five-year electrical apprenticeship in Alameda County. And this program encouraged us to get out to work in union jobs versus non-union jobs. So, I applied to several different trade groups that were union represented, and the electrical trade opened up the fastest.

I tell people my experience doing this work has been 96 percent positive and 4 percent negative.

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days incarcerated. Upon my release, my lawyer gave me some great constructive criticism and suggested a career in construction. I felt that I was in a situation where I had to think outside of the box. In my area, people that collect trash cannot have a criminal record, which made me feel that job opportunities would be slim to none. So, instead of beating my head against the wall in industries that didn't want me or hadn't carved out space for me, construction was the most viable choice because it was more forgiving and it came with a living wage. I thought if I worked hard I would set myself apart, break down a negative stereotype, and be able to blaze a trail for myself. So, I took my lawyer's advice and did research on how to get into the construction industry.

I've had to endure some situations that were unpleasant. Later in my career, a foreman called me Aunt Jemima because I wore a headscarf. I felt it was a teachable moment. After I documented what happened to me, I felt that I needed to try to win over my brother and say, "Hey, I don't think you really know what you're saying. Let me share with you the historical implications of comments like that, and how they don't have any place on the job site." By the end of the day, he was able to see it my way and apologize. We were able to move on and continue to get this money, because that's the end-goal with this. We're all trying to feed our families. So, I feel like I've won over my brother.

Black women are just looking for opportunity, especially with so many women who are heading

households. We are looking for a chance. People want to feed their families. I mean, it's a big deal.

We're just looking for a chance, and unions are supposed to be that group that does that for you. What unions promote—better wages, better benefits, and retirement—is something anyone wants. And as women of color, we've been held back from those opportunities too long. Women, especially women of color, just want a seat at the table so that we can put food on the table.

When I talk to young adults, I ask them, "Who had two parents in the household?" They say, "No, it was just my mom." And I say, "Was there too much money in the household?" And they say, "No, there were times we struggled."

So, let's turn that on its ear. Why not pay a mother like we would pay a man? She's the head of the household, right? There are so many lives we could change if more money was there. More money, more upward mobility, better benefits, and retirement income. A chance to retire, and retire with dignity.

My highest hope for the labor movement is for it to be open to all, and to really apply what the movement says in its message. You say you're for social justice and social change? Show it. Open your ranks to all—all races, genders, legal status and immigration status. A worker is a worker is a worker. We wouldn't be in this economic downturn if most of the workers were unionized, at all levels. But we have created an "us" and "them" effect. Labor in general was set up to protect the white, male wage. But why not pay us all like that?

For every dollar that a man makes,

Women are making only **78¢**

For a black woman, it's only **64¢**

For Hispanic women, it's only **56¢**

Source: "Employment Fact Sheet: FAQ About the Wage Gap," National Women's Law Center, October 2014.  
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