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Russ Burns retires as head of Operating Engineers Local 3

ALAMEDA, CA – Following a distinguished 40-year career as a member of Operating Engineers Local 3, the largest construction trades local in the nation, and spending the last 13 as the union’s business manager, Russell E. Burns retired at the end of June. He served five terms as the union leader, making him one of the longest running business managers of the 80-year-old trades union.

“It’d be hard to find a better example of a labor leader than Russ Burns,” said Speaker of the California State Assembly Anthony Rendon. “He embodies what labor unions do, because he fought for his members, but his efforts were for the benefit of every working person. His advocacy for safe working conditions, fair wages and needed infrastructure legislation all wound up helping everyone, not just unionists.”

Current Local 3 President Dan Reding will take his place, having worked along Burns’ side for his entire tenure. Citing Burns’ election to the business manager position in 2006 and his subsequent five terms, Reding said, “During that timeframe, Russ systematically changed the way union business is run, with accountability, transparency and integrity always being at the forefront of every decision he made. The respect Russ Burns has earned from the Labor community will not be achieved easily; however, I am up to the challenge.”

Burns joined Operating Engineers Local 3 in 1979 as a crane operator working on high-rises, bridges, refineries and large treatment plants throughout Northern California and Nevada. He began his career on the Local 3 staff in 1994 as a union business representative in Fairfield, Calif. and was promoted over time to several leadership positions within the union. In 2000, he graduated from the Harvard Trade Union Program, and in 2001, he was appointed to the Cal-OSHA Standards Board for the Certification of Crane Operators. In 2002, Burns was appointed Local 3 treasurer, until Jan. 2, 2005, when he was sworn-in as financial secretary. In 2006, he was elected business manager by the membership, serving in this capacity for five consecutive terms, until he retired at the end of June.

Burns helped lead his union through the Great Recession of 2008, which caused a huge decline in private-industry construction. Today, the union has recovered and continues to train operators, mechanics, surveyors and dredgers within its four-state-jurisdiction training facilities in California, Nevada, Utah and Hawaii.

Burns mobilized Local 3’s membership and staff in the successful effort to pass California Senate Bill 1, ensuring an annual \$5 billion be earmarked for transportation projects in California to meet the infrastructure needs of the growing state. He then went on to lead the union’s grassroots effort to defeat Proposition 6 in last year’s election.



“Russ has accomplished a lot on behalf of those he represented and worked with during his long career,” said California's Senate President pro Tempore Toni G. Atkins. “His legacy will always be one of a man who successfully fought for good-paying jobs, improved labor relations and provided economic growth and safer infrastructure for the residents California. I wish him well on his retirement.”

In recent years, Burns helped combat the effects of California's historic wildfires by ensuring the training of hundreds of Local 3 operators in Hazmat protocol, which provided safe and effective cleanup of the devastated areas, first during the North Bay Fires, and currently for the Camp Fire. He worked closely with California Gov. Jerry Brown and the California Office of Emergency Services (CALOES) to secure the fire cleanup work for locally trained operators rather than unskilled out-of-state workers who had no emotional ties to the sensitive nature of the work they were performing. In doing so, he received a Blue Ribbon Certificate of Recognition from Sonoma County for the recovery efforts during the North Bay Fires of 2017 and the Gold Resolution from both houses of the California State Legislature, the highest honor from the State of California. The Sonoma County Board of Supervisors also recently recognized him with a resolution on his retirement.

Throughout Burns' tenure as Local 3 business manager, he has served on numerous boards, including first vice president of the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) General Executive Board, the California Labor Federation Executive Council and the California Transportation Board of Directors. Burns was appointed by the speaker of assembly to serve on the California High-Speed Rail Authority Board, a position he stepped-down from in 2012 to devote more time to the union. Burns was appointed to the California Fish and Game Commission in May of 2016 and will serve out his term until Jan. 15, 2022.