

Zero-Emission Journey: San Francisco Bay Ferry Industry Urges Workforce Expansion for Electric Engine Transformation

By: B

A huddle of about ten crowd around a white board. "Brotherhood of the Sea " beams on a hanging helm above them. Every day at 10:15 a.m., deckhands and terminal agents file into the Inlandboatmen's Union of Pacific (IBU) hall, climb the stairs that ripple like waves and pass a plaque memorializing "those that gave their lives that organized labor might live" to bet on boat shifts. Those with seniority and longer working hours have first dibs. On June 6, they compete for seven.

Rod Pueyrredon, a deckhand with almost a year of work, waits his turn. His stomach rumbles with nervousness beneath a San Francisco Bay Ferry sweatshirt. Every week and month, his hours shift like the ferries, rocked by tides. He braces himself for no job.

When a union worker reads off a 13-day, 40-hour shift on a Richmond run, three throw their cards in, chips all in. "Rod," the IBU representative calls, ripping him a receipt for his work. He grins at the paper, as if he won the pot. Some leave with one-day shifts or none. As one of Pueyrredon's competitors passes, he congratulates him with a fist bump.

"We're all union brothers," Pueyrredon said. "There's sort of a loyalty to your fellow union guy because we're all out there going through the same struggle."

Now, as the ferry industry faces the green rush, ditching diesel for lower emission electric and tier 4 engines, it needs workers. The workforce demands ripple from ferry deckhands to welders and machinists. Each role plays an integral part in the meristem ecosystem, many sharing IBU hall space, Bobby Winston, Working Waterfront Coalition leader, said.

Although ridership plummeted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has rebounded, according to the Water Emergency Transportation Authority (WETA). In May, San Francisco Bay Ferry ridership levels were 71% of May 2019 levels, the best month since February 2020, the agency [announced](#) June 1. The growth is in part due to the cut fares and expanded services from 2021, Thomas Hall, the WETA spokesperson, said.

"When you ride the ferry, it becomes hard to go back to driving in gridlock on the bridge," Hall said. "We think it is a great time for us to continue to build."

The ferry's future features transitioning from fossil fuels. The San Francisco Bay Ferry, operated by the Water Emergency Transportation Authority, leads the way. WETA built the nation's first high-speed passenger ferry with tier 4 certified engines in 2019. Now, 12 of the 16 ferries in the fleet are powered by the tier 4 engines. WETA has raised nearly \$100 million to construct five battery-electric ferries to serve Alameda, Oakland and waterfront neighborhoods. Once the boats are built, they will require more workers, Hall said.

The industry as a whole is currently short 600 workers, Winston said. In response, he formed the Working Waterfront Coalition to recruit high schoolers and others.

The coalition bolsters the marine trades training program, career technical education and develops a fee for service to promote hiring tax credits and hiring incentives for employers.

The coalition prioritizes diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), returning work to a disadvantaged waterfront community, Winston said. He added that the working waterfront is welcoming and successful in integrating formerly incarcerated people.

“The focus on DEI and creating new opportunities and economic mobility for a whole new generation and existing generations, I am so proud,” Jessica Alba, a WETA board of director and transportation policy manager for Stanford University, said at a June 5 WETA meeting.

The jobs offer solid pay, medical insurance and paid time off, Robert Estrada, the IBU regional director, said.

The union launched the benefits. Prior to hiring halls, captains plucked workers from the streets at random, while workers bribed them with cigars and their wives, Chris Carlsson, San Francisco historian, said.

The 40-year ferryboat captain, John Leale, tied the grass-like tule, hollow like green onions, in knots around the vessels as a makeshift anchor, earning the nickname “tule sailor” for ferry workers. Leale wrote that the job was strenuous and required coffee.

The industry has journeyed a long way for longshoremen, too, who once yanked cargo with swinging rope. Ricky Quevedo’s grandfather became a chief clerk at the time when longshoremen collected fruit from the Mission Creek banana boat hatches.

Quevedo is a third generation longshoreman and deckhand. His grandfather, who traveled on a work visa from Peru, landed them the job. Now, he and 14 others in his family work together to launch the boats by lifting the stringer line.

“Welcome aboard,” Quevedo says to each passenger, as he lifts the rope, and they filter through.

His father’s friends called him and his brother hatch tenders, destined for the job from childhood.

“(My teachers) asked me ‘what do you want to do?’ he said. “And I’m like, ‘I want to be a longshoreman like my daddy.’”

Many in the industry are like Quevedo, Winston said. His program aims to expand the business to others, beyond word of mouth.

But for Quevedo and Pueyrredon, the legacy of ferries may carry through their family line. Both agree they would pass the job onto their children, as their parents did.

Marlene Wheeler roped her two sons, including Pueyrredon, and nephews into the mariner industry, as though she had flung out a tube and the jason’s cradle ladder. Pueyrredon, at the

time, was 16 and working for Kentucky Fried Chicken. Soon enough, he was a union ticket ferry worker as ferry business chugged slowly, due to the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge.

Estrada recalls Wheeler once boarded a ferry to clean, donned in bunny slippers and a bathrobe. She was a jack of many trades, also selling wine and pie she made from backyard pomegranate and plums and offering tarot card readings. She instilled in Pueyrredon inner drive.

“She was just a force, really, my mom was,” he said. “If someone says you can't, she would say I am. And she would.”

“Without her, I would've never started.”