About Local 600

The International Cinematographers Guild represents the most talented camera professionals and publicists in the world. The technicians and artisans in our union are the creators of the visual images on the big screen, the television screen and our computer screen. That's why we're so excited about offering this site to our members, everyone in our industry and to people everywhere who want to know more about what we do.

International Cinematographers Guild members - Directors of Photography, Camera Operators and Assistants, Visual Effects Supervisors, Still Photographers, Publicists and more - are part of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees. The IATSE is comprised of highly skilled technicians working in film, television, live entertainment, animation, special effects and new media.

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Short History of the Guild

Hollywood was still in its infancy when seven cameramen, who had to haul and operate their own equipment, met in their kitchens to organize the first photographers local. They founded the Guild during the dawn of a new art form. Motion pictures were black and white, cameras were handcranked, ‘talkies’ were just coming into vogue, television wasn’t even a gleam in David Sarnoff’s eye, and the early cinematographers and their camera crews were inventing a language for expressing emotions and ideas with moving images.

Today, thanks in large part to the International Cinematographers Guild, cinematographers and camera crews are recognized as artists and technicians with a rich tradition of accomplishment.

In the opening days of the 20th Century, when Edwin S. Porter and W.B. “Billy” Bitzer began to develop a vocabulary for visual storytelling, the fight for creative recognition and fair working conditions had not yet begun. But, as films like Birth of a Nation created stars out of filmmakers like D.W. Griffith, cinematographers and their crews were quickly thrust into the background - designated as “below-the-line.” Bitzer, for example, went from earning $300 a week, along with a share of the profits and credit, to missing in action from movie posters and ads heralding the shining achievements of early auteurs.

The 1920s roared in with advances in black and white film stock, improvements to the structure of motion picture cameras and their capabilities, the advent of sound and the migration of the industry from its original confines in and around New York and Chicago to the wide open space of Los Angeles. Together, these developments resulted in more work for more camera people in more parts of the country. Decent working conditions were not yet on anybody’s radar screen. At the time, cinematographers were earning a measly $25 a week, and cots were a mainstay on sets so crews could make their next morning’s call.

It was conditions like these that led cameramen to turn to the IATSE for help. When IATSE Local 644 was chartered in New York City in 1926 - followed by Local 659 in Los Angeles in 1928 and Local 666 in Chicago in 1929 - camera crews finally had a voice at the negotiating table.
By the 1930s, the studios had cinematographers under contract along with the actors, writers, directors and other key players. Crews were mainly hired by the job and advanced very slowly - usually when someone retired or died. The Union took on small fights, but often lost to the Hollywood powers-that-be. There was little doubt about who held the upper hand, particularly after producers won a difficult strike in 1933. Indeed, cameramen like Bill Clothier, who flew a plane over a set during the strike to disrupt shooting, were blacklisted for years.

The proliferation of color film stocks and the blossoming of television created even more opportunities for cinematographers. The endless search for balance between light and dark solidified itself as an art form in the '40s and '50s. Two generations of cinematographers who had cut their teeth on film had taken very quickly to the new medium of TV.

Despite the budding excitement about increased work in the new genre, practices like closed industry rosters and standbys were obvious signs of tension among the three geographically divided camera locals. For years, the locals routinely ignored their own procedures for allowing members to transfer from one local to another, claiming they couldn't accommodate any new members. As frustration among members with the tri-local system boiled over, the sentiment for a merger grew.

The industry was changing as well. In an effort to compete with television, studios spent the better part of the '60s and '70s developing the formula for "blockbuster films," and by utilizing lighter camera equipment, began shooting movies on multiple locations around the country. While these developments pumped new life into the sagging film industry, they spelled the end of the studio system and contracts for stars, writers, directors and cinematographers.

Visionaries like Conrad Hall and Vittorio Storaro were able to take advantage of this startling shift to remake the art form. However, leadership of the locals was not so forward thinking. Jurisdictional disputes between the three camera locals continued during this new age and lingered into the 1980s - when the next great generation of cinematographers took hold of the Guild and steered it towards unification.
In 1984, George Spiro Dibie was elected president of Local 659. He delivered on his promises to open the Guild to all qualified people who had the ambition, talent and skill required for success. Dibie's efforts laid the groundwork for establishing the national local. With the aid of distinguished cinematographers like Allen Daviau and Owen Roizman and operators like Michael St. Hilaire and Doug Ryan, demoralizing and wasteful jurisdictional lawsuits filed by one local against another made way for a unified and more powerful camera local that would be able to negotiate with increased bargaining power and improve health and pension plans.

The legacy of the divide-and-conquer strategy employed by producers made the unification process a long and laborious one. As recently as 1991, the Chicago and New York Locals were pitted against each other in a power play enacted by five of the major studios during an impasse in contract negotiations with Local 644. In the end, work dried up on the East Coast and failed to provide the anticipated boom to Chicago and other parts of the Midwest.

Ultimately it took the efforts of IATSE International President Tom Short and a legal ruling by a federal district court judge to make the merger a reality. On May 16, 1996 Local 600, the International Cinematographers Guild, was born. By 1998, with Dibie as its first president, 93 percent of the voting membership ratified the first-ever national camera contract, underscoring the overwhelming support for the merger.

With Dibie at the helm, 6,000 members of camera crews throughout the United States were able to stand up to producers and secure work from Los Angeles to North Carolina, from New York to Texas. Membership boomed immediately after unification, when the Hollywood roster was opened up to new members and to those across the country. Nationwide membership rolls expanded by over 800.

The united bargaining front, under the leadership of International President Short, was the saving grace of Guild members' health and pension plans. It allowed the union to win additional contributions from producers, to increase bankable hours and to ease qualification requirements for members. In 2000 and 2002 in local negotiations, Local 600's negotiating committee - comprised of camera operators, camera assistants, still photographers and cinematographers from all regions - stopped producers' take-back proposals by staging hands-on demonstrations with live cameras and maintaining unity at all times.
On the political front, Local 600 members have carved their own places at the table where decisions are made - working with federal, state and local politicians to attack problems that are unique to our industry such as runaway production.

Training has also been made much easier. Now members across the country are able to refine their skills and make themselves marketable in the 21st century. Recently, the Guild grew its constituency once again when President Short merged the Cinematographers and Publicists in 2002. Not only is the Guild more united than ever, it now has even more resources to broadcast its message to the industry and better serve the needs of all of its members.

For over 85 years, the Guild has focused on protecting and serving the interests of its membership. It will be this spirit of camaraderie that guides the union during its next 85 years and beyond.