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Portland

Six building trades unions form Construction Alliance

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Two unions — the Laborers and Operating Engineers left the AFL-CIO Building and Construction Trades Department on March 1 to establish the National Construction Alliance with the Carpenters, Teamsters, Bricklayers and Iron Workers. The new alliance will represent roughly 2 million construction workers nationwide.

[At press time, it was not known if the Iron Workers, Bricklayers and Teamsters would leave the BTD, which is part of the national AFL-CIO. The Carpenters disaffiliated four years ago.]

Formation of the National Construction Alliance was announced at a press conference Feb. 14 by Operating Engineers President Vincent Giblin and Laborers President Terry O'Sullivan. At that time, the union officials said they would disaffiliate from the Building Trades Department, effective March 1. The departure, according to Giblin and O'Sullivan, was due to dissatisfaction with the AFL-CIO department's political structure and because it sometimes did not concentrate on bread-and-butter issues of interest to rank-and-file construction workers.

The impact of the National Construction Alliance on statewide and local building trades councils is unclear. Some Laborers and Operating Engineers locals "will selectively remain" in local building trades councils, Giblin said, assuming the councils are effective. "When the Carpenters and the Teamsters withdrew from the AFL-CIO, a whole host of local building trades councils let them stay to participate, and our speculation is that they would continue to do so," O'Sullivan added.

However, the two international presidents told Workday Minnesota it was likely the National Construction Alliance would be creating its own local structure. O'Sullivan said he had talked with about 25 unionized contractor associations and they all welcomed the changes and the creation of a new organization. He also said Change to Win — the new labor federation — had no role in their decision to leave the building trades. "There is no association between the National Construction Alliance and Change to Win," he said.

The Laborers, Carpenters and Teamsters joined four other unions last year to create the Change to Win Labor federation. The Laborers have maintained their affiliation with the AFL-CIO, but O'Sullivan reiterated that "it is only a matter of when, not if" they leave. Giblin said "the jury is still out" on whether or not the Operating Engineers will leave the AFL-CIO.

Edward Sullivan, president of the AFL-CIO's Building Trades Department and general president of the Elevator Constructors Union, said in a correspondence to state and local building trades councils that "working members (of the departing unions) should not be punished for the decisions of their leaders. Therefore, we ask you to continue your diligence and your patience as our affiliated unions determine a better path to the future." He said the BTD governing board of presidents will meet soon "to map a definitive course for the building trades."

Bob Shiprack, executive director of the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council, told the NW Labor Press that he will continue "doing business as we have always done business. None of this stuff has made any sense to me from Day One. We cannot allow the distractions we get from Washington, D.C., to impact our workers and contractors here in Oregon."

John Mohlis, executive secretary-treasurer of the Columbia-Pacific Building Trades Council — and a member of the Bricklayers Union — has talked to business managers from several of the affected crafts and they all say they do not intend to leave.

Storm Warning

Merger madness in utility industry threatens reliability

By ERIC WOLFE

Shortly after making landfall along the Gulf Coast of Florida last October, Wilma was downgraded to a Category 2 hurricane with top winds around 100 mph. Nevertheless, power outages were unprecedented. Over 3 million Florida Power and Light customers lost power, including 98 percent of Miami-Dade and Broward counties. Ten thousand utility poles that were supposed to withstand winds of 119 mph crumpled, 240 substations were knocked out, and Florida regulators launched an investigation to find out why.

But you don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to figure this one out. Since 1991, Florida Power and Light has cut operating and maintenance costs per customer by over 35 percent. Between 1995 and 2002 the Florida Power & Light workforce was slashed from 14,500 to 9,800. Between 2002 and 2004 the utility decreased per-customer tree trimming costs by 5 percent, accompanied by a sharp increase in tree-related outages.

State regulators say that it would take the utility 60 years, at its current pace, to inspect all of its poles.

You might think that Florida Power & Light, chastened by Wilma and under investigation, would embark on a crash program to rehabilitate its infrastructure. The utility has the cash — its stock price has performed almost 20 percent better than the average electric company over the past five years. But Florida Power & Light has found a better use for its money. Recently, the utility announced that its holding company, FPL Group, will purchase Constellation Energy Group — familiar to Californians as one of the out-of-state energy pirates forced to settle with the state's attorney general for gaming California's electricity market in 2000-2001.

The FPL-Constellation marriage was made possible by the repeal last August of the Public Utility Holding Company Act. But their merger is little more than the advance winds of a monster storm of utility consolidation now gathering on the horizon. For the utility customer who expects reliable service, for the utility employee who depends on a stable employer, for the retiree who relies on a regular dividend from a "safe" utility stock, there may be no safe harbor when the storm arrives.

A World Without PUHCA

For generations, Americans have received electric service from utility companies close to home. The mission of these companies has been to provide everyone with safe, reliable service at the cheapest possible price. State regulators, answerable to the public's elected representatives, have provided the oversight needed to make sure that utility

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Goodbye, Dubai

Oregon labor unions joined a widening outcry over the Bush Administration-approved sale of major port operations in six U.S. cities to the United Arab Emirates-owned Dubai Ports World. The ports of New York/New Jersey, Baltimore, New Orleans, Miami and Philadelphia are currently managed by the P&O Company of Britain. P&O has union contracts with the International Longshoremen's Association at those ports. More than 150 unionists rallied at Terminal 6 in North Portland on Feb. 24 — part of a nationwide event called by the Teamsters, which represents thousands of drivers who work in and around America's ports. "We will not stand by and allow our homeland security to be compromised," General President James Hoffa said in a statement. "This is a bad deal for workers and a bad deal for the security of America's ports." In a statement read at the Portland rally, Oregon U.S. Rep. David Wu, said, "The U.S. prohibits foreign ownership of our airlines and good farmland. We should consider applying such laws to our nation's ports."