

Portland City Council resolution

Construction unions break into residential 'green jobs'

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

Unions may get a foothold in Portland's "home energy retrofit" market — and be a part of reducing the city's greenhouse gas emissions — thanks to a Sept. 30 City Council resolution.

Under the resolution, contractors selected for the city's Clean Energy Works Portland pilot project will be required to enroll new hires in a certified training program. The Oregon and Southern Idaho Laborers Employers

Training Trust will likely be the first such program ready to go.

The resolution also requires that contractors commit to neutrality toward any decision by workers to unionize, and agree to recognize a union if a majority sign authorization cards. And contractors will be required to pay the prevailing wage or 180 percent of the Oregon minimum wage, whichever is higher.

Clean Energy Works Portland was developed by the City of Portland,

modified by the Oregon Legislature, and funded by a \$2.5 million stimulus grant from U.S. Department of Energy. The program loans homeowners money to do retrofits, which can consist of insulation, air and duct sealing, and installation of more efficient furnaces, heat pumps, and hot water heaters. The loan is then paid back over a 20-year period on gas and electric bills. Since the energy savings begin right away, homeowners can expect to have no increase on their bills, even as they enjoy the increased comfort of a better-insulated home.

A pool of 12 contractors for Clean Energy Works Portland will be selected using a "best value contracting" process, which gives extra points to employers that provide health insurance, hire graduates of pre-apprenticeship programs, and employ women, minorities, and formerly incarcerated individuals.

"Any effort to raise the floor on standards is going to help us," said Laborers organizer Ben Nelson, "because the contractors we want to work with are the ones that want to have benefits. And a lot of things you agree to do as a union contractor are going to add points in this best-value bidding process."

A city-appointed committee will enforce the resolution and certify the training providers.

Laborers training director Al DeVita said the Corvallis-based center is ready in October to start training weatherization installer technicians, supervisors, and home energy auditors. Based on

employer demand, the classes could be held in Portland. Workers new to the field would take a two-week general construction and safety training class, followed by a two-week weatherization installer tech class.

Laborers union representatives are pursuing talks with several contractors about a special residential wage and benefit rate, which would be lower than the union's regular scale for commercial work.

Representatives of the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters and the Sheet Metal Workers have also shown interest, and could follow up with training programs of their own.

The City Council resolution is formally known as the "Community Workforce Agreement on Standards and Community Benefits in the Clean Energy Works Portland Pilot Project." Local union reps call it a breakthrough, and possible model for other locales. Federal investment in retrofits is rapidly growing, but unions have had little presence in residential work. The Portland program is starting small: 500 homes are supposed to be completed by next summer. So the immediate impact of the resolution is modest. The pilot project is expected to employ about 40 workers, and about 10 of those would be new hires who would go through the training program.

But the work is on track to scale up rapidly. Project managers envision home energy retrofits for 100,000 homes in Multnomah County in the coming years. Portland is competing

with other cities for an additional federal grant of \$100 million, and may know by the end of the year whether it will get that funding.

The Portland resolution was the product of months of complex multi-party negotiations. Local Laborers took part, with support of representatives from the international union and Change To Win, plus Green For All, Oregon Tradeswomen, Inc., several minority pre-apprenticeship programs, and the labor-faith-community group Metropolitan Alliance for the Common Good. The resolution spells out that a project goal is that 20 percent of the dollars go to minority, women or emerging small business contractors, while 30 percent of the workers be women, minorities or from low-income communities. To meet the latter goal, contractors sign "first source" hiring agreements with qualified training programs.

Up to now, there hasn't been an officially established "prevailing wage rate" for the "weatherization technician" classification, since there was never any requirement that contractors pay prevailing wage. But the U.S. Department of Labor, asked to do a survey, found that for Multnomah County the standard compensation was \$15 an hour plus 29 cents an hour for benefits. That would be the wage under the resolution, since 180 percent of Oregon's minimum wage is \$15.12 an hour.

The City Council meeting to vote on the resolution took place after this issue went to press, but there was no known opposition.

Portland in line for 'Emerald City' green jobs pilot program

Portland is one of 15 U.S. cities being considered for participation in a new project known as Emerald Cities.

The Emerald Cities Collaborative — led by the AFL-CIO Building and Construction Trades Department (BCTD) and environmental justice groups like Green For All — proposes to do a comprehensive city-by-city energy efficiency retrofit of America's urban building stock. The goal is to reduce the carbon footprint and energy consumption of government, commercial, and residential buildings — and generate good jobs, as well as pathways for women and minorities to careers in the building trades.

Starting in five cities, Emerald Cities Collaborative will offer organizing assistance, training investments, and help raising private capital to local coalitions of labor and minority community groups.

Many details are still being worked out, but as envisioned, local alliances of labor and minority community groups would pool their influence on local elected leaders to try to get public

support for city-wide retrofits. Women, minorities, and low-income residents would be targeted for access to the jobs and contracts, which would include wage and quality standards, and commitments to training, so that workers could move beyond entry-level weatherization jobs.

The BCTD would develop a cross-trade retrofit training curriculum for the workers, which would serve as a standardized pre-apprenticeship program preparing participants for apprenticeships in the building and construction trades. And low-income neighborhoods would have priority in getting the residential retrofits, both as a matter of justice and practicality. Typically older, less well maintained buildings are where the greatest energy efficiency improvements can be made.

Portland-area building trades leaders heard about the project at a Sept. 22 meeting at International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 48 hall. The decision will be made by the end of October whether Portland will be one of the first five cities to take part.

Remembering the real Norma Rae

By BOB BUSSEL

Crystal Lee Sutton, the textile worker and union activist whose experience was dramatized in the movie "Norma Rae," died Sept. 11 after a long battle with brain cancer. She was 68.

During the late 1970s, I worked for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union as the New Jersey coordinator for the national consumer boycott of J. P. Stevens, the company that employed Crystal Lee Sutton.

J. P. Stevens was the WalMart of its day — a serial labor law violator. In 1978, the company became the poster child for our ultimately unsuccessful effort to reform the National Labor Relations Act and ensure the right to organize.

I met Crystal Lee when she came to New Jersey as part of a national tour after the movie's premiere. Crystal Lee did not always adapt easily to her role as public spokesperson, some of my union colleagues said. She could be demanding with the union and was not as disciplined as campaign organizers

would have preferred. She could be uncomfortable when she was asked larger political or strategic questions.

Like many of us, her life was marked by contradiction, no doubt made bigger by the gap between her real story and Sally Field's mythic portrayal of her on the movie screen.

Shortly before her death, Crystal Lee reflected on the events that led to her being thrust into the spotlight: "When I went in the plant with my union pin, you would have thought I had the plague, and that is when the trouble started. It was truly different because a woman had never done or dared to do such stuff."

Within the culture of the southern textile mill town, Crystal Lee's actions were audacious. She did in fact scrawl "union" on a sheet of cardboard and prompt her fellow workers to turn off their machines. As depicted in "Norma Rae," that memorable scene shows how an act of individual courage can inspire others to acts of solidarity — one of the most cherished values of the union

movement.

I am always moved to tears by that scene, as the deafening roar of the mill diminishes one machine at a time, to near silence, and workers revel in their collective defiance of the employer who has dominated their lives.

Many unions now give "Norma Rae" awards to honor courage and activism among their members, and I have no problem with giving these awards in the name of a fictional person. However, we should not forget that "Norma Rae" was a real person, Crystal Lee Sutton, who in a shining moment showed us the meaning of courage, the power of solidarity, and perhaps most importantly, that trade unionism can become the vehicle enabling ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.

(Editor's Note: Bob Bussel is director of the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Oregon.)

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