

Machinists will oppose health reform bill if it taxes benefits

Obama tries to convince other union officials to drop opposition to the tax

WASHINGTON, D.C. —The International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) Executive Council voted unanimously Jan. 11 to oppose any national health care reform bill that is funded by taxing the value of workers' health care benefits.

"For decades, Machinists members exchanged substantial wage increases for the best possible health insurance," said IAM President Tom Buffenbarger. "Now, in a bizarre turn of events, their

insurance premiums will be subject to a 40 percent excise tax if the Senate version of health care reform becomes law. Democratic leaders have the power to stop this travesty and I urge them to do so, quickly and completely."

A key provision in the Senate's version of health care reform calls for taxing 40 percent of the value of workers' health insurance above minimums of \$8,500 yearly for an individual and \$23,000 for a family.

The House-passed health care revision does not tax health benefits.

President Barack Obama met with 11 union leaders Jan. 11 to try to convince them to drop their opposition to the tax. Buffenbarger was not

among the 11 to attend.

Labor has other problems with the Senate bill, including its lack of a public option to compete with the private insurance companies.

National AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka told the National Press Club prior to meeting with the president that "instead of taxing the rich, the Senate bill taxes the middle class." And it's "not just union members' health care. Most of the 31 million insured employees who would be hit by the tax are not union members," he said.

Trumka went even farther. "The Senate bill is inadequate and does not deserve the support of working men and women. We aren't going to accept a bad bill just to get an agreement."

The "bad bill" Trumka cited is presumably the basis for the final version of health care reform. That's because Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), had to make many compromises — including taxing workers and dumping the public option — to get the 60 Senate Democratic votes he needed to halt a GOP filibuster and pass the bill.

Buffenbarger said that no single issue brought more union members onto last year's presidential campaign trail than Republican threats to tax health care benefits, and the Democrats' pledge to protect those benefits.

"Like NAFTA, the health care excise tax is an issue with the potential to reverberate for years," he said.

Sheet Metal training center gets piece of \$5 million ARRA grant

Sheet Metal Workers HVAC & Metals Institute will get \$150,000 over two years to train workers in green jobs industries.

The money is part of a \$5 million American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) jobs stimulus grant awarded to Oregon Manufacturing Extension Partnership (OMEP) by the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration.

Sheet Metal Workers Local 16, Machinists District Lodge 24, and the Northwest Oregon Labor Council were

spotlighted as "key partners" in the grant award. Only Sheet Metal Workers is benefiting financially.

"Our goal in all this is to take our existing workforce and make it sustainable," said Dennis Boyd, training coordinator for the Sheet Metal Training Center. "We want to sustain the workforce as well as the environment."

Boyd said that if the training center can offer a program "that helps make our people more employable, that's what we'll do."

Local 16 is currently experiencing

25 percent unemployment among its 2,150 members. It has 150 apprentices in training.

Bob Petroff, directing business representative of Machinists District Lodge 24, is hopeful that some of the money will be used to introduce apprenticeship training programs at unionized companies such as Beaverton-based Integrated Power Services, where 11 employees are members of Local Lodge 63.

Over 37 companies have expressed interest in participating in the program,

and have projected 775 new jobs over the next two years. Interested companies include SolarWorld, Renewable Energy Composite Systems, Miles Fiberglass, SANYO, and GK Machine.

The grant award specifies that money is to be used to train and place unemployed and dislocated workers — with a focus on veterans, women, and minorities — in Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas, Marion, Polk, and Yamhill counties in Oregon, and Clark, Cowlitz, and Wahkiakum counties in Washington state in careers such as hy-

brid/electric auto technicians, weatherization specialists, wind and energy auditors, and solar panel installers.

OMEP will conduct an analysis of the skills and production requirements of the renewable energy industry and identify those manufacturers deemed to be good candidates for employee training to develop and/or manufacture new product lines to support the industry.

The grant is projected to preserve or create 1,700 jobs in the nine counties, with as many as 1,325 participants earning certificates or degrees.

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