

Laborers Local 296 signs two home energy contractors

Abacus and Faison are the first to sign long-term union contracts

Portland-area homeowners now have a union option when they're ready to save money and the planet with a "home-energy retrofit." On June 1, two general contractors, Abacus Energy Solutions and Faison Energy Solutions, signed a two-year contract with Laborers Local 296, agreeing to pay the new union scale for weatherization: \$16.48 an hour, with 3 percent annual raises, health insurance, and four paid holidays and a week of paid time off per year for full-time employees.

The retrofits usually begin with an "energy audit" to determine where a home is wasting energy. In older houses especially, money often goes up the chimney and out the window. Insulating is relatively inexpensive and brings the biggest bang for the buck, not to mention increased comfort. Those who want to go the extra mile look at more efficient furnaces, tankless water heaters, energy-efficient windows, even rooftop solar panels. Abacus and Faison manage all phases of the retrofit, and



TAKING THE HIGH ROAD: From left, Faison Energy Solutions manager Dave Hammond, Laborers organizer Ben Nelson, Abacus co-owner Jim Plantico, and Laborers Local 296 Business Manager Ken Morgan

can help get financing as well, with a state program known as Clean Energy Works Oregon.

Locally and nationally, the Laborers Union has been pushing home energy retrofits as a growth industry. But breaking into the largely nonunion residential remodel sector has been slow going. In early 2010, the Oregon Laborers Train-

ing Center trained workers in weatherization, only to see most of them fail to find employment. Later that year, the union's patient involvement yielded what seemed like a promising result: Six contractors signed the equivalent of a project labor agreement to retrofit homes in Portland's Cully neighborhood. But when the project ended, so

did the union affiliation.

Now Abacus and Faison — two of those six contractors — have decided to throw their lot in with the union. Part of the appeal is a commitment by the Laborers — joined by community allies like the Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good and Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon — to aid in generating business. The partners formed a group, the High Road Contractors and Community Alliance, and meet every other week to strategize on marketing.

Faison and Abacus have 12 employees total. For now, the work is too erratic to enable the contractors to enroll in the union-sponsored health trust, which requires 130 hours a month of work. But the contract commits them to pay for health insurance for their employees, and half the cost of dependent health care. That sets them apart from nonunion competitors, they say.

The home energy retrofit market itself has enormous potential, but growth has been fitful as incentives come and go and federal grants are awarded and spent.

A city-wide pilot project, now rolled out statewide as Clean Energy Works Oregon, takes away the biggest obstacle, though — financing. Qualifying homeowners get financing for the retrofits, and can repay the loans on their en-

ergy bills.

Homeowners can plug into the program and get a union-signatory energy audit at weatherizeforgood.org or by calling 503-893-9240.

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