

## JOBS



"I am not here today to encourage deregulation," said IBEW Local 48 representative Mike Bridges, center, at Nov. 29 House Natural Resources Committee hearing, "but that process needs to adhere to the actual regulatory requirements and follow a reasonable timeline."

## Federal rules have delayed coal terminal 5 years, IBEW Local 48 rep tells Congress

By Don McIntosh

For a construction project to be delayed more than five years while federal agencies work on a 4,000-page environmental impact statement: Is that what Congress intended when it passed the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1969? That's the question a Longview union official took to Congress Nov. 29, testifying before the House Natural Resources Committee.

"The Building Trades support a thorough permitting process, but that process needs to adhere to the actual regulatory requirements and follow a reasonable timeline," IBEW Local 48 Business Representative Mike Bridges told committee members at a hearing on "Modernizing NEPA for the 21st Century." Bridges represents electrical workers in Southwest Washington, and serves as president of the Longview-Kelso Building and Construction Trades Council. IBEW flew him to Washington, D.C., to tell Congress the NEPA process has gone off the rails for projects like the coal export facility Millennium Bulk Terminals has proposed to build in Longview, Washington.

Millennium proposes to redevelop the site — a Reynolds Aluminum smelter that closed in 2000 — as the West Coast's largest coal export terminal. But the proposal has run into

opposition from environmental and community groups, and has had great difficulty getting all the federal, state, and local permits it needs.

Building trades unions have been supporting the project because the company signed a project labor agreement pledging to use union labor, to the tune of 1,350 direct jobs and \$70 million in direct wages.

Millennium submitted its permit applications in February 2012. It took three-and-a-half years for the Seattle office of the Army Corps of Engineers to complete the "draft" Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that the federal NEPA law requires. And the final EIS is still unfinished.

"I don't think Congress would think that a federal NEPA EIS should take six years, especially given the scope of our project," Wendy Hutchinson, Millennium Vice President of Public Affairs, told the Labor Press. "We're really a trans-loading facility trying to build two docks on the Columbia River, no different than the hundreds of other docks that the Army Corps has permitted in the Columbia River."

In his testimony to the House committee, Bridges said NEPA has been used to protract and impede agency officials from making a permit decision, instead of serving as a useful tool to solicit input from the public

and educate decision-makers about a proposed project's environmental pros and cons — as Congress intended.

"NEPA was not enacted to function as a political process to allow members of the public to voice their approval or disapproval of a controversial project," Bridges said. "Yet the multiple NEPA hearings I attended on the Millennium project functioned as a public voting booth of sorts. At these public hearings, I witnessed singing grandmothers, people dressed as their favorite endangered species, and other theatrical antics, designed not to inform agency officials but to publically protest the project."

Bridges said building trades unions support responsible and consistent environmental regulations and have been involved in renewable energy projects and environmental improvements at industrial facilities for decades. But they also want jobs building infrastructure for fossil fuels, which are still the main source of energy.

"We get accused even by our members: 'Why are we supporting a dying industry?'" Bridges told the Labor Press. "I just always remind folks: We don't get the opportunity to decide what the Port wants to invest in or what a private entity wants to invest in. But we're going to support responsible,

## COLLECTIVE BARGAINING



Rain was heavy but spirits were high as New System laundry workers walked off the job the morning of Nov. 28.

## New System laundry strike ends after two days

Workers at New System Laundry returned to the job Nov. 30 after two days on strike.

The strike was called after the company proposed to pay minimum wage to its overwhelmingly female Vietnamese and Chinese workforce in negotiations over a new union contract with Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 49. New System also wants to double the employee contribution to health insurance premiums to \$213 a month.

New System does laundry for hotels, hospitals, and restaurants. During the walkout, groups of three to eight workers visited the company's clients to introduce themselves, explain the strike, and ask for symbolic

displays of support. Local 49 then tweeted pictures of workers, managers and owners at over a dozen restaurants holding signs saying "I support New System workers."

Dozens of community supporters also turned out to walk the picket line with strikers, including Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek.

An overwhelming majority of the 71 members of the bargaining unit took part in the strike, but a handful of workers remained on the job.

At press time, there was no word on whether further strikes are planned. The next negotiation session, aided by a mediator, was scheduled to take place Dec. 13, after this went to press.



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