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Green jobs, but not for you

Construction unions say state-subsidized clean energy work is going to nonunion out-of-state firms and out-of-state crews.

By Don McIntosh

Parked outside wind farm construction sites throughout Northeastern Oregon, Mike Alldritt sees the same thing again and again: a line of pickup trucks with Texas and other out-of-state license plates arriving on the job.

Alldritt, who lives in a tiny Eastern Oregon community called Lexington, has been keeping tabs on renewable energy projects since April 2017, when he started as a business agent for the Iron Workers union. Since then, he says nearly all the work has gone to nonunion, out-of-state firms that bring in non-union crews from outside of Oregon. And it's not just the initial construction that Oregonians are losing out on, but periodic maintenance overhauls known as "re-power" work, in which fiberglass blades are replaced and rotors changed out.

These are private projects, and can hire who they like. But what burns Alldritt and his fellow building trades union representatives is that these projects



In a video created by the Oregon Building Trades Council, Iron Workers Local 29 member Clint McCollum speaks out against renewable energy work going to out-of-state workers when Oregon taxpayers are subsidizing the work.

benefit from Oregon tax subsidies. As of 2019, about a dozen utility-scale wind and solar projects in Northeastern Oregon were saving over \$30 million a year total thanks to the state's Strategic Investment Program (SIP) property tax break, a 15-year property tax exemption.

"We've supported these projects for years, and when they finally broke ground, they turned around and spit in our face," Alldritt said. "People need to understand how important these jobs are to rural communities. Union jobs are good living wage jobs that provide a lot for Oregonians."

Oregon Building Trades

Council Executive Secretary Robert Camarillo says projects that benefit from state tax subsidy should have to meet employment standards—like requirements to hire local, pay prevailing wage, and take part in apprenticeship programs to train the next generation of workers.

"They wonder why we get behind fossil fuel projects," Camarillo says. "When [fossil fuel] developers come to town they sign a Project Labor Agreement. We don't get that with renewable energy developers."

To figure out what to do about Oregonians missing out on so much tax-subsidized renewable energy work, Camar-

illo convened an ad hoc task force: Staff and leaders of five building trades unions that could be employed on the projects meet via Zoom every Tuesday: Operating Engineers Local 701, IBEW Local 48, Laborers Local 737, Iron Workers Local 29, and Cement Masons Local 555. Task force members worked to create videos in which Eastern Oregon residents and union members say how they feel about the jobs going to out-of-state workers. The hope is that renewable energy developers—and state lawmakers—will come to see the value of local union labor.

The campaign may be on the verge of getting results. Building trades union officials have been meeting with representatives of Oregon's biggest wind developer, Portland-based Avangrid Renewables. Avangrid—majority-owned by the Spanish multinational Iberdrola—is getting nearly \$8.5 million a year in SIP tax breaks for five large Oregon wind farms. After hearing from building trades, Avangrid has agreed informally to have general contractors consider local union contractors on future projects.

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