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A Division of the WV State Building Trades, AFL-CIO | Chuck Parker, President | John Epperly, Secretary-Treasurer | Justin Williams, Director

Bill to Cut Unemployment Passed by the WV Senate

For the second year in a row, the West Virginia Senate has passed a bill that would cut unemployment benefits down to just 12 weeks.

Unless stopped in the House of Delegates, the bill will head to the Governor's desk to be signed into law.

With the 2023 legislative session halfway over, the trades have continued to fight against the proposal that would reduce the duration unemployment benefits pay in a year.

Currently, West Virginia's unemployment benefits model is at the national average of 26 weeks in a year.

The bill (SB 59) is currently pending in the House Workforce Development Committee. If passed there, it will head to the House Finance Committee and then to the House floor.

Some proponents of the bill claim West Virginia's workforce participation rate is a reason the benefits should be cut in order to force people into the workforce.

However, George Capel, Government Relations Director of the West

Virginia State Building and Construction Trades says this point is not relevant.

"West Virginia's low workforce participation rate has nothing to do with unemployment benefits," said

Capel. "To receive benefits, you must have earned West Virginia wages in **Cont. on p. 2>>**



Delegate Evan Worrell (R-Cabell) speaks at the annual West Virginia State Building and Construction Trades Legislative Conference on January 17, 2023. Worrell has been a vocal opponent of SB 59, a bill that would cut unemployment benefits from 26 weeks to 12 weeks. Worrell is Chairman of the House Workforce Development Committee and the founding member of the West Virginia Republican Labor Caucus.

Agreement Reached between Trades and Rippon Energy on 99MW Solar Project

Earlier this month, the West Virginia State Building and Construction Trades (WVSBT) and the North Central Building Trades Council signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Rippon Energy Facility LLC to use WVSBT labor in building a solar project in Jefferson County, West Virginia.

The planned project will be a 99MW facility, utilizing 215,000 solar panels, with an estimated total project investment of \$125.4 million.

The construction will also include a new substation to connect the facility to the electrical grid as well as underground utilities.

Torch Clean Energy, owner and

operator of Rippon Energy, anticipates that the project will create approximately 200 construction jobs with about \$8 million in labor income for Jefferson County and the state of West Virginia.

According to a study commissioned by the company, the total economic impact of the project, with

construction labor and other economic activity, would be more than \$30 million and generate about \$3 million in state and local taxes.

In late 2022, the Jefferson County Commission approved the 878-acre Rippon solar project, making it the third solar energy Facility planned

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Hope Gas Enters Newly Formed Agreement to Purchase People's Gas West Virginia

Hope Gas has entered an agreement with Essential Utilities to purchase People's Gas West Virginia, expanding its service area by thousands of customers.

Late last year, Ullico/Hearthstone Utilities Inc. closed on its acquisition of Hope Gas, formerly Dominion Energy West Virginia for \$690 million.

Now, the company is aiming to further expand its business in West Virginia shortly after through the planned purchase of People's Gas

West Virginia.

"I'm proud to continue to grow our investments in West Virginia with Hope's acquisition of Peoples Gas WV. Hearthstone closed the acquisition of Hope Gas from Dominion Energy on September 1, 2022," Hearthstone President/CEO Morgan O'Brien said in a statement.

"We are well on our way to meeting and exceeding our commitment to bring new jobs to West Virginia, and we are opening our new corporate headquarters in Morgantown in

2023."

At the time of the original purchase, Hope Gas was the second-largest natural gas utility in the state.

Since that time, they have added customers and serve West Virginia residents in 35 counties.

O'Brien says the employees of People's Gas would continue to be employees of Hope Gas going forward.

"We're really looking forward to

welcoming all of them into Hope Gas, as well as the almost 13,000 customers that will become part of Hope Gas," said O'Brien.

The sale of People's Gas West Virginia is subject to the approval of the West Virginia Public Service Commission.

Representatives from Hope Gas anticipate a decision to come down from the West Virginia Public Service Commission later this year. ■

Unemployment Cuts

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the last 18 months. Meaning, individuals on unemployment do not contribute to the low participation rate. So, using this as an argument is disingenuous."

SB 59 is a version of similar legislation that was run for the first-time last year and did not pass.

In the final hours of the 2022 West Virginia legislative session, the House of Delegates did not take up the bill for consideration before midnight on the last day, effectively 'killing' the bill.

However, the proposal has come back again for a second year in a row.

"National policy groups and out-of-state interests have deployed their lobbyists here in the state to try and

force this through the legislature," said Capel. "They passed this measure in Kentucky, Florida, and other states and now they want to bring this bad bill to West Virginia."

Capel says calling and emailing your legislator is the best way to make sure this bill does not become law.

"The activism by our members has been really effective," said Capel. "We must continue telling lawmakers in the House of Delegates to vote NO on SB 59."

Contact information for members of the West Virginia House of Delegates can be found by logging on to www.wvlegislature.gov/House/roster.cfm. ■

Agreement Reached

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for development in Jefferson County.

At the same time, the Jefferson County Commission also approved an 841-acre project at Wild Hill, with which the trades also have an agreement, and Blake a 516-acre project.

The projects came about as a result of the West Virginia legislature's passing of SB 583 in 2020, creating a program to further the development of renewable energy resources in this state for economic development.

The bill authorized utilities to build solar projects up to an agree-

gate 400MW in 50MW increments, so long as they are able to sell up to 85% of the power in each increment before proposing the next 50MW increment.

However, an individual facility may not exceed 200MW.

The Rippon Solar project is currently being considered by the West Virginia Public Service Commission (PSC).

A start date for construction is still uncertain due to the pending approval of the PSC. ■

Trades Host Apprenticeship Tours for Lawmakers



Brett Matthews (center right), Training Coordinator for Plumbers and Pipefitters 625 speaks to members of Charleston City Council about their apprenticeship program.

The tour is part of an ongoing initiative by the Affiliated Construction Trades (ACT) and the WV State Building and Construction Trades to educate federal, state, and local lawmakers about the value of craft apprenticeship programs.

"With so many opportunities and the abundance of federal funds for public construction projects, it's important for us to educate the public and public officials on apprenticeship and the construction industry as a whole," said Justin Williams, ACT Director of West Virginia.

"The Inflation Reduction Act and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law have provided us with a once in a lifetime opportunity. We have to work together with lawmakers and state agencies to ensure we all make the most of it."

Trades Complete Strategic Planning Process

Earlier this month, the West Virginia State Building and Construction Trades (WVSBT) finished their month-long strategic planning process to set goals and objectives for the future.

The process began with an opening session, following the annual Legislative Conference on January 18 and ended with the closing session on February 8.

Between sessions throughout the month, crafts were asked to contribute action items for goals and objectives that are important to ensure the WVSBT has a prosperous future.

Among the topics discussed were: promoting apprenticeship programs; West Virginia workforce development; policy research and voter education;

developing relationships with state & federal lawmakers and agencies; labor-management partnerships; promoting job-site safety; and many other issues.

In December of 2022, ACT Director Steve White retired after 30 years of service to the Trades and new ACT Director Justin Williams began serving in the role.

However, this is not the only change in leadership the Trades have seen in recent months. New leaders have been stepping up throughout all the WVSBT affiliated crafts.

In addition, veteran leaders have been mak-

ing plans to address new issues in the construction industry that have been brought about from new opportunities in federal funding sources and

emerging energy projects such as hydrogen, nuclear, and natural gas facilities.

West Virginia State Building and Construction Trades Secretary-Treasurer John Epperly said taking on this strategic planning process was important since the organization, and the construction industry at-large, is

currently in a period of transition.

“It’s important for us to bring everyone together in charting our course for the future,” said Epperly. “Times are changing, and we plan to be ahead of the curve so we can continue to provide the best programs and the best workforce the construction industry has to offer.” ■

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John Epperly

*Secretary-Treasurer
West Virginia State Building
and Construction Trades*



Representatives from West Virginia State Building and Construction Trades (WVSBT) crafts attend the first Strategic Planning Session at the Four Points Conference Center on January 18. The event followed the annual 2023 WVSBT Legislative Conference held at the same location in Charleston, WV.

WV Press Association Opposes Attack on WV Jobs Act



West Virginia Press Association Executive Director Don Smith addresses the Senate Workforce Committee, testifying against SB 21.

SB 21 is a bill that would make certified payroll documents a secret and unavailable to the public.

“The WV Press believes in transparency and open government,” said Smith.

“This information is useful in helping the public monitor [construction] projects. West Virginia workers not employed on these jobs are able to see who is working, what wages are being paid, and other details of the project.”

The West Virginia Jobs Act requires contractors to prioritize using local workers on public construction project job sites. Many in the trades believe concealing these payrolls would make it easier for contractors to illicitly use out-of-state labor.

Because of this, Smith says if the information on certified payroll documents is concealed, it may lead to many unlawful activities going unreported on job sites.

“The data in these documents support investigations and claims on public projects. Individual workers, companies or unions bring such issues to the attention of the government and the media.”

SB 21 has passed the full Senate and is now pending in the House Judiciary committee. If the bill is approved in committee, it will then head to the House floor for a full vote.

Call your representatives and tell them to vote NO on SB 21.

Local Contractors Lost ~\$1.4 Billion New Study: Repeals of Prevailing Wage Laws Hurt Local Contractors and Workers

Earlier this month, a new study published by the Illinois Economic Policy Institute found that states who repealed prevailing wage laws over the last decade are now hurting worse than states that left the laws in place.

The study examined six states who repealed their prevailing wage laws between 2015 and 2018: Indiana, West Virginia, Kentucky, Arkansas, Wisconsin, and Michigan.

Utilizing data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics within the U.S. Department of Labor, the study compared construction market outcomes in states that repealed their prevailing wages laws to those that kept the laws in place.

According to the data, local contractors lost between 1 and 2 percent of the total industry market share, amounting to a loss of between \$1.1

billion and \$1.4 billion in annual business revenue.

In addition, the study found: there were no cost savings for states

assistance worsens, and fewer projects are completed by local contractors—all without saving taxpayers any money.”

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Trades Oppose Cuts to Unemployment at Capitol



Members of Laborers Local 1149 from Wheeling meet with WV Delegate Erikka Storch (R-Ohio) outside the House Chamber about the bill to cut unemployment benefits.

Storch, who is also Executive Director of Project BEST, has been a great advocate for the trades at the WV Capitol and is opposing SB 59.

SB 59 would cut unemployment benefits from 26 weeks to just 12 weeks.

SB 59 originally only increased work search requirements and addressed fraud and abuse of unemployment benefits.

However, the Senate amended the bill to include the cuts to benefits as well.

“This is the second year in a row they have run this attack against working families,” said Justin Gray, Business Manager for Laborers Local 1149. “We wanted to make sure all of our lawmakers understand that these cuts would be devastating to all construction workers and those of us who work in seasonal industries.”

SB 59 has already passed the Senate.

The bill is currently pending in the House Workforce Development Committee. If passed there, it will head to the House Finance Committee and then to the House floor.

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who repealed prevailing wage laws; the construction worker on-the-job fatality rate increased 14%; construction worker reliance on food stamps grew by 2%; and construction worker employment growth was between 11-14% slower.

According to the study’s executive summary, “The data show that repeals of prevailing wage laws have negative consequences for construction workers, businesses, and communities...reliance on government

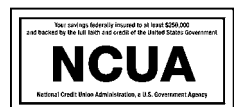
West Virginia repealed its prevailing wage laws in 2016.

Since that time, many officials on both sides have questioned the effectiveness of the decision to repeal these laws.

“We got rid of prevailing wage, and we’ve run to the windows—and [the businesses] haven’t come,” said Governor Jim Justice (R-WV).

As of 2023, a total of 28 states plus the District of Columbia still have prevailing wage laws. ■

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