Labor’s Efforts Helped Produce $6.4 Billion to Accelerate Nuke Cleanups

The communities around Hanford, Washington, and Oak Ridge, Tennessee, owe a debt of gratitude to labor—specifically the Metal Trades and Building Trades Departments—for their help in securing substantial allocations to sustain and accelerate ongoing environmental cleanups of two of the nation’s oldest nuclear weapons development sites. The money—all $6.4 billion of it—was included in President Obama’s stimulus package passed just days after the inauguration.

At the request of local Metal Trades and Building Trades Councils, members of the Senate Appropriations Committee signed a letter urging their colleagues to approve the funds. MTD President Ron Ault and BCTD President Mark Ayers, in a communication to House Appropriation Committee members, pointed out that the funds would immediately create some 10,000 new jobs and another 100,000 related additional jobs.

A big part of the “recovery” in the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (the stimulus package) is job creation. Both the White House and the congressional majority insisted that putting the U.S. economy back on track will take more than just getting Wall Street and the banking system healthy. America and Americans need jobs. President Obama pledged that the measure would create 4 million new, sustainable “green” jobs. Congressional Republicans were

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Federal Budget Halts Contract Studies

The omnibus budget legislation adopted by Congress and signed by President Obama in early March reverses the Bush-era pro-contracting policy that had cost thousands of federal employees their jobs.

Contracting out of federal jobs has been going on for decades, but in one of his earliest actions, George W. Bush created an outsourcing competition initiative that effectively set up a quota for all agencies to give jobs to contractors. As a result, federal agencies initiated competitions that forced government employees to bid for their jobs against low-wage, no benefit contracts with little or no oversight from the executive branch to determine if there were any tangible savings. Although the Bush Administration claimed that it had saved $7 billion because of the contracting initiative, those figures could never be verified.

When Democrats regained control of Congress in 2006, there were several attempts to reverse that process. Budget measures were adopted forbidding the use of appropriated funds to contract jobs in nine key agencies. Congress also passed legislation to exclude health care costs from the comparison process.

In 2008, Congress tried to suspend job competitions for one year at civilian agencies and for three years at the Department of Defense, but that effort failed.

While the omnibus budget bill only applies through the end of FY 09 (September 30), ending the process altogether will require additional legislation.

However, the omnibus measure does require civilian agencies to review all current contracts and issue guidelines

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Sen. Arlen Specter has apparently seen the light, declaring his intention to switch parties when he runs for re-election next year. We say, hallelujah! We cannot automatically assume that he will follow up by pledging his support for the Employee Free Choice Act. As we know, some of our formerly most reliable Democratic senators have developed weak knees on that bill, so we’re asking union members in Pennsylvania to keep talking to the Senator to encourage him in that direction. If Mr. Specter does come around on that point, you can be sure that his example will put a little more steel in the backbones of his colleagues.

Fresh off of the 2008 elections, we can vividly recall the heartfelt promises we heard from so many of our dear friends who were seeking our votes. Fast forward six months, it’s now time to remind these dear friends that they got what they wanted from us, now it’s our turn. Vote right on the Employee Free Choice Act!

Every labor-endorsed candidate knows by now that there are some issues that are so fundamental to labor’s cause that we just can’t just look the other away while they vote against us. EFCA is that kind of an issue.

Well, it just so happens that there are some, just a few, members of the U.S. Senate who are asking us to do just that.

There are a number of other senators who are wavering, weak, undecided or opposed to EFCA now, even though they pledged their support earlier. Most importantly, every senator on the list below would not have been elected if not for the votes and support of union members.

That list includes:
- Evan Bayh Indiana;
- Jon Tester, Montana;
- Claire McCaskill, Missouri;
- Mary Landreau, Louisiana;
- Jim Webb and Mark Warner, Virginia;
- Ben Nelson, Colorado;
- Blanche Lincoln and Mark Pryor, Arkansas.

We don’t have to threaten “reprisals” for those who abandon us, but we can and will hold them accountable on this vote—more than any other vote before or since.

As the old biblical admonition says: “Ye will know them by their deeds.”

Ron Ault, President
Metal Trades Department

The Metal Trades Department played a key role in Virginia supporting the 2006 election of Sen. James Webb and the 2008 victory for John Warner. Although both senators enjoyed huge labor support, both Webb and Warner are now among the nine in the Senate who are now waffling on support for the Employee Free Choice Act. Here, Warner and Webb (far right) are shown greeting Barack Obama at a rally in Virginia Beach on October 30th last year.
Mixed Signals From Gates Budget Statements

Defense Secretary William Gates has been issuing mixed signals in comments on the direction he intends to steer the Pentagon. The Secretary’s dilemma is understandable, given the mess created by his predecessor, Donald Rumsfeld. But nevertheless, the Metal Trades is concerned over the Pentagon’s long-range strategic plans which seem to prioritize insurgency fighting at the expense of traditional war fighting capabilities.

“It’s quite obvious that we need the capability to deal with both, and given our current involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is understandable that the first priority is to deal with the current situation and buy some time on long-term problems,” said MTD President Ron Ault.

Unfortunately, he added, “research and development on major weapons systems and strategic hardware such as ships and fighter aircraft carry long lead times for development and final design. There isn’t really much time to ‘buy’ in the long run,” Ault said.

The Pentagon has given the green light to continued production of littoral ships of the DDG 50 line, but definitive production for DDG 1000 Zumwalt class ships is still an on-again, off-again issue.

“With all the national security challenges America faces, I don’t believe we have the luxury of deferring any of these systems. China, Russia, Korea and any number of nations that view us as competitors are going all out to beef up their air and seapower. China, has every intention of surpassing us as the best equipped seapower in the world. That is an ominous prospect,” Ault said.

Defense Department Takes New Course in Obama Era

Hard on the heels of the announcement that NSPS will be subjected to a complete review, leaders of the unions of the United DOD Workers Coalition (UDWC) met in early April with newly-appointed Deputy Secretary of Defense Bill Lynn for a wide-open discussion of labor relations.

“I was struck by the genuine concern [Secretary Lynn] demonstrated, He intently listened to each organization’s comments,” explained MTD President Ron Ault.

Ault described the meeting as a “first step for us to have a place at the table” as President Obama had promised. The session, which was presided over by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, included Lynn’s staff, the Deputy Secretary and NSPS Program Director Brad Bunn.

At the meeting Ault pointed out that NSPS was filled with flaws, but the worst affront of all was the implication that DOD employees and their unions were somehow a threat to national security. Noting the long history of contributions that union-represented DOD workers had made to the nation—starting with the Manhattan Project and their current involvement in maintaining the nation’s nuclear weapons arsenal along with the vital role that civilian personnel play in supporting troops in war zones—Ault said the presumption that union membership undermines national security is repugnant.

He also brought up the morale problems encountered by workers facing the loss of jobs from contractors, citing workers at the Norfolk Naval Public Works Center where the unit endured three competitions against private contractors in the past 10 years. In the last go round, Ault said, “they became even more efficient than the ‘most efficient organization’ they had become while they wait for the results of their third competition to be announced in June.” Ault complimented the Deputy Secretary for his decision to put all outstanding competitions on hold and reviewing jobs with an eye toward bringing them back in house, including hiring some 45,000 new civilian workers.

Despite the tensions between Bush Administration DOD officials and labor, Ault had praise for former Deputy Secretary Gordon England. “The good working relationship that we developed, despite our disagreements over policy, enabled us to work together to get two 500-person capacity crew barges placed at the Northrup Grumman shipyards in Pascagoula and New Orleans following Katrina.”

Those crew barges are now used as temporary housing for Navy crews assigned to the shipyard for christening and launching new ships.

MTD History Booklets Available for Training

Limited copies of “Celebrating 100 Years of Service,” a booklet illustrating the history of the Metal Trades Department, are available on a first-come, first-served basis from the Metal Trades Department. We also have Metal Trades folders and pens that can be used for Metal Trades Councils or international affiliates planning officer and steward training programs. All are free, you pay shipping. Contact Lisa Johnson (202-508-3705) for more information.
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Why Does Right-Wing PR Mogul Behind Anti-Union Campaign Get Tax-Free Status?

The Metal Trades Department has called on Congress and the White House to investigate actions by Citigroup, AIG and Bank of America—companies that participated in conference calls where they discussed ways to stop enactment of the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). The department also wants to know how Richard Berman, the evil genius behind the big business anti-union campaign qualifies as a tax-free “educational” foundation.

The October 17, 2008, teleconference included suggestions that business leaders should support then-embattled Republican senatorial candidates to set up a firewall against the bill. They also encouraged contributions to a private effort by anti-union Washington PR mogul Richard Berman who has directed some of the most virulent anti-EFCA ads. Citigroup, AIG and Bank of America had all received federal bailout funds.

Richard Berman, who has used his connections with the Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers and major companies to conduct anti-union campaigns under the guise of “educational foundation” activities. Berman runs a $10 million a year public relations company that sets up websites and buys advertising targeting unions and union-backed programs.

According to an Associated Press account, Bank of America hosted one conference call three days after receiving $25 billion in federal bailout funds and AIG executives participated in that same call.

Hoping to aid opponents of EFCA in the Senate, they pleaded with participants on the call, mostly stock analysts or individuals with investment portfolios, to urge clients to prop up the campaigns of endangered Republican candidates, including Norm Coleman of Minnesota, Gordon Smith of Oregon, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, Elizabeth Dole of North Carolina, and Roger Wicker of Mississippi.

“If there are not enough Republicans operating as a firewall, after this election it is going to be very difficult to hold the line,” predicted Berman. “The only way after these elections if we don’t have a filibuster proof Senate... is to make this issue so hot in some states so that even a Democrat who is up for election in 2010 has to think twice about whether or not they are going to let this thing go by.”

At one point, another individual on the call suggested that participants send major contributions to Berman’s organization as a way of affecting the election without violating the McCain-Feingold campaign finance law. “Some organizations have written checks for $250,000, $500,000, some $2 million for this,” said the man, likely Steven Hantler, the director of free enterprise and entrepreneurship at Bernie Marcus’ Marcus Foundation. Marcus is the founder of Home Depot.
The Metal Trades Department, AFL-CIO (MTD), is urging that a special board of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) designate all former Pantex personnel in Amarillo, Texas, eligible for Special Exposure Cohort status.

The designation will enable those workers to expedite valid claims for compensation under the Energy Employee Occupational Illness Compensation Program (EEOICP). MTD President Ron Ault, in a report to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Advisory Board on Radiation and Worker Health, said that the absence of adequate records of exposure makes procedures such as dose reconstruction inaccurate and unreliable. Dose reconstruction is supposed to determine whether cancers or other illnesses are the result of radiation and other toxic exposures, but the process is nearly impossible without a sufficient record of exposures.

Current Law Inadequate

The standard procedures “do not serve the purpose of providing an adequate remedy for former nuclear workers who have become sick or have died as a result of their exposure to radiation. The law is simply falling far short of its goal,” Ault said.

Current law does allow claimants to bypass individual record-keeping requirements and scientifically-suspect and controversial “dose reconstruction” formulas to determine whether a given workers’ condition or disease was probably caused by on-the-job exposure. The EEOICP Act passed in 2000 authorizes HHS to expand Special Exposure Cohort (SEC) designation under federal rule-making authority in response to petitions. HHS already has the authority to designate Special Exposure Cohort status claims for employees who have developed any specified cancer or other disease.

Worker Screenings

For several years, the Amarillo Atomic Metal Trades Council has been working with an independent, Department of Energy-funded medical surveillance team from Drexel School of Public Health, the University of Texas Health Center at Tyler and a local clinic operated by the West Texas A&M College of Nursing. These experts in occupational medicine are evaluating former workers for possible workplace-related health problems. The medical team is helping workers to deal with and document the health consequences of radiation and other toxic exposures at the Amarillo plant. Former employees who are concerned about possible health effects of exposure can contact the team for screenings and follow up (see below for details).

MTD Backs New Bill

The Metal Trades Department is also endorsing legislation recently introduced in Congress by Sen. Mark Udall (D-CO) and Rep. Jared Polis (D-CO) that would expand eligibility for compensation under the program and eliminate many of the current burdens and red tape imposed on former nuclear workers seeking compensation.

A memorandum written for the MTD by Sheldon Samuels, a professor with Drexel University and the Ramazzini Institute, supporting a petition by Pantex claimants, emphasizes the complexity of current law. Samuels says the law spreads responsibility for administering the compensation program too widely among various federal agencies and invites conflicts of interest among disparate groups of experts and consultants. NIOSH, the Centers for Disease Control and evaluators from the National Institute of Health and the National Academy of Science are all involved in regulating eligibility for compensation under the act.

The Department of Labor is charged with processing and paying claim requests. Individual claimants are instructed to provide records of exposure and disease that the Department of Energy supposedly maintained, but often were never generated, kept or made available because of national security fears.

Shoddy Record Keeping

The first request by Pantex workers for SEC status was submitted three years ago by Samuels on behalf of the union, claimant Sarah Ray and Dr. Laurence Fuortes of the University of Iowa. That submission documented that DOE’s monitoring and record-keeping on radiation and other exposures was “inadequate or non-existent” making it impossible for Pantex claimants to comply with demands for records to be used in dose reconstruction.

Samuels points out that committees of the National Academy of Science and the National Institutes of Health both have challenged the use of statistical tables to determine the probability of causation of cancer or other exposure-related diseases in individual cases. The only alternative is an SEC. He also points out that the lack of protection, monitoring and record keeping was particularly bad before 1989, when then Energy Secretary Admiral James D. Watkins scrapped past practices because he was convinced that conditions in the nuclear weapons complex were unacceptably poor. Data from pre-1989 years and, to a lesser extent, data generated after 1989 cannot be used to deny claims on the basis of dose reconstruction for individual cases.

Former employees who are concerned that their health may have been compromised as a result of their employment at Pantex can request a free examination, along with follow-ups and referral to specialists by calling 1-888-378-8939 or 806-378-8939.

The independent medical team will assist with documenting the health consequences of radiation and other toxic exposures for workers at the Amarillo plant.
5 Myths on Nuclear Power

By Todd Tucker

Thirty years ago, a chain of errors and equipment malfunctions triggered the defining event in the history of American nuclear power: the accident at Three Mile Island. Although no one died and the health consequences were insignificant, the mishap was vivid confirmation that things could go wrong with a nuclear reactor. It almost instantly galvanized popular opposition to this form of power, giving rise to lingering misconceptions about one of our nation’s largest sources of electricity.

1. Three Mile Island killed the idea of nuclear power in the United States.

The 1979 accident and the fear it spawned were undoubtedly setbacks to the nuclear power industry. Only recently did utilities even attempt to license new reactors again. But Three Mile Island didn’t even kill nuclear power at Three Mile Island. While TMI 2 was destroyed, TMI 1 is still in operation today. In fact, in generating electricity, nuclear power is second only to coal, which produces about half the power we use. Nuclear today produces more electricity than it did at the time of the accident—about 20 percent compared with 12.5 percent in 1979.

2. Long half-lives make radioactive materials dangerous.

It’s impossible to read anything about the problem of nuclear waste without having to consider enormously long periods of time: thousands of years, or tens of thousands, or even longer. The Web site Greenpeace.org, for instance, points out that plutonium 239, a byproduct of uranium fission, “has a half-life of approximately 24,000 years. . . . However, the hazardous life of radioactive waste is at least ten times the half-life, therefore these wastes will have to be isolated from the environment for 240,000 [years].” There seems to be something intrinsically evil about anything that persists for so long. But a long half-life doesn’t necessarily make a substance dangerous.

A half-life is a measure of how fast a radioactive material decays. Take Carbon 14. This is a slowly decaying radioactive isotope present in natural carbon, which occurs in all living things. Archeologists and scientists measure the amount of carbon 14 remaining in an object to calculate its age. A useful, radioactive and harmless part of every person, Carbon 14 has a half-life of 5,730 years. Conversely, some short-lived isotopes can be extremely dangerous. Nitrogen 16, which is produced in operating nuclear reactors, emits very high-energy radiation despite its half-life of just 7.1 seconds.

None of this is to say that radioactive waste isn’t dangerous or isn’t a problem—even industry boosters identify it as one of the biggest challenges they face. But the problem isn’t the material’s half-life—it’s the level of radioactivity it possesses.

3. Nuclear power is bad for the environment.

Many nuclear reactor byproducts are dangerous and require careful long-term storage. This is at the root of the fairly widespread belief that nuclear power is incompatible with a concern for the environment, even though its effects compare favorably with coal’s.

The top environmental concern for most of us is global warming, and nuclear power is by far the biggest source of emission-free power we currently have, contributing none of the greenhouse gases that coal plants spew by the ton every day. Neither does nuclear power require the decapitation of Appalachian mountains or the construction of billion-gallon sludge ponds. So why won’t environmentalists even consider the nuclear alternative? Some have, notably former Greenpeace member Patrick Moore, Whole Earth Catalog founder Stewart Brand and Gaia theorist James Lovelock. But most environmentalists remain constitutionally averse to nuclear power, for reasons that Brand has described as “quasi-religious.”

4. Nuclear power is “unnatural.”

From Godzilla to Blinky the three-eyed fish on “The Simpsons,” many of pop culture’s oddest creatures owe their existence to the mutating powers of radiation. It’s easy to forget that radiation and nuclear processes are pervasive in the natural world. President Harry S. Truman put it memorably when he presided over the keel-laying of the USS Nautilus, the world’s first nuclear-powered ship, in 1952: “Her engines will not burn oil or coal. The heat in her boilers will be created by the same force that heats the sun—the energy released by atomic fission, the breaking apart of the basic matter of the universe.” Cosmic rays bombard us constantly, and radioactive isotopes of common elements are an unavoidable—and benign—part of our food supply. Uranium, the primary fuel in most nuclear reactors, is a natural substance found all over the globe, roughly as plentiful as tin.

5. A nuclear power plant is similar to a nuclear bomb.

Not really. Nuclear power plants use fission—the splitting of uranium atoms to release enormous energy—to create power. Modern nuclear weapons use nuclear fusion: the fusing together of hydrogen atoms to release even greater amounts of energy. It’s true that early nuclear weapons, such as the one dropped on Hiroshima, were fission weapons that used uranium as fuel, but scientists had to overcome incredible technical challenges to get the fuel to compress long enough to reach a “critical mass” that would release explosive levels of energy. A nuclear power plant is a radically different machine, designed with great care to convert nuclear fission into steady power over a period of years. You couldn’t turn a nuclear reactor into a bomb any more easily than you could power your house with a hand grenade.

There is one important link between nuclear power and nuclear weapons: Uranium-fueled reactors produce plutonium, a key ingredient in the construction of nuclear bombs. This is why the United States is justifiably concerned about any nations that are building or attempting to build nuclear power plants.

Nuclear power certainly isn’t without hazards, and the industry does itself a disservice by proclaiming that it can construct a reactor that is “inherently safe,” implying a condition in which nothing bad can ever happen. That’s not possible in any manmade creation. It’s also easily disproven the instant something bad does happen—as it did at Three Mile Island. All methods of power generation involve trade-offs, a balancing of risks against returns. We shouldn’t evaluate nuclear power any differently.

Todd Tucker is the author of “Atomic America: How a Deadly Explosion and a Feared Admiral Changed the Course of Nuclear History.”
Stimulus Jump Starts Nuclear Cleanup Projects

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By April, it was clear that the job creation provisions of the stimulus package had not yet taken hold as the Labor Department announced unemployment figures. The data showed that unemployment rose to 8.5 percent—or 13.2 million workers. By comparison, in 1933, there were 11.4 million unemployed, although that figure represented almost 25 percent of the workforce.

Both the Hanford and Oak Ridge projects, in recent years, had encountered deliberate “slow-walking” by the Bush Department of Energy leading to frustrations for workers on those jobs as well as for the communities that had for decades been promised quick and total environmental remediation.

Contractors at both Hanford and Oak Ridge are in the process of hiring and training additional workers.

Several other provisions of the ARRA will add employment among Metal Trades affiliates. Sections requiring the use of American-made iron and steel in all projects and products purchased with funds authorized by the act were retained in the final passage of the bill, despite efforts by “free trade” advocates to wipe them out. Another section of the law requires prevailing wage payments for contractors hired to perform stimulus projects.

The law also includes approximately $4 billion to improve air quality and efficiency in all government buildings, along with additional money for projects in all parts of the nation.