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'It's about getting people back to work'

Protest staged at pipeline site

May 2, 2012

By LINDA HARRIS - Business editor , The Herald-Star

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BERGHOLZ - Frustrated that more local workers haven't been able to cash in on the oil and gas drilling boom, union rank and file rallied Tuesday at Progressive Pipeline work sites in the Bergholz area.

The workers, members of Laborers' International Union of North America, said that, despite promises that the oil and gas industry would create jobs for Ohio Valley residents, not enough local workers are finding employment with those companies.

"There's a lot of work now," said Curt Mayle, business manager for LIUNA Local 1015 in Canton. "This area's been depressed for a long time. Now the work is finally here and we're not getting it."

Mayle said it's a worker issue, not a union issue.

"It's about getting our people to work, getting our local people to work," he said.

Mississippi-based Progressive is installing Chesapeake Energy's gathering system in the Bergholz area.

Chesapeake, contacted after the rally, said when hiring it looks at safety performance record, scheduling availability and cost as well as qualifications.

"To suggest that we do not hire contractors who use local labor is completely false and companies here in Ohio, both union and nonunion, can confirm our practices," company officials said in a brief, two-paragraph statement issued in response to questions about their hiring practices. "In the case of the pipeline project in Bergholz, 11 bid requests were sent out and Progressive Pipeline, using some local laborers, is the one that was awarded the project."

LIUNA members complained that Progressive has brought its workers in from other parts of the country to do work that union members are fully capable of doing.

"Look at their license plates, they're from out of state - Mississippi, Texas, Arkansas, from all throughout the country," said Christopher Brown, secretary/treasurer of LIUNA Local 801 in Steubenville. "But these resources are in the Tri-State, the Ohio Valley and we have people ready, willing, skilled and qualified to do this work."

Mayle said LIUNA members are trained and OSHA-certified for pipeline work. He said they've gone to job fairs throughout the region "but not one of my people has been hired."

"They're trained for this kind of work, that's what they do," he added. "I've talked to people who drove a long way (to job fairs) and didn't get anything out of it. Everybody thinks this is where the work is, we get calls every day from all over the country. There's all this work here, and we're not getting any."

By 11 a.m. the LIUNA members stationed at the main entrance to the pipeline work site had been ordered to disperse. Jefferson County

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Sheriff Fred Abdalla, called to the scene, said Chesapeake personnel had requested the site, which they are leasing, be cleared.

"There are some issues with the property, who has the right to be on it and who doesn't," Abdalla said after talking with project supervisors and LIUNA leaders. "Union workers are permitted to go on state property, but we can't have pickets right along the highway (or) on property where they shouldn't be."

A sheriff's deputy accompanying Abdalla told LIUNA leaders project supervisors had reported a rock-throwing incident, caught on camera by one of them. They also said a Porta-John the picketers had been using near the entrance had been vandalized in some way.

Chesapeake officials, meanwhile, had little to say about the allegations of misconduct on the part of the LIUNA members.

"It is our understanding that there may have been some destructive behavior during (Tuesday's) event and we are working with local law enforcement to gain all the details before commenting further," they said in their statement.

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