

Bowles **Rice**

VIEWS *&* VISIONS

BOWLESRICE.COM

SUMMER 2024

Labor Is Committed to Collaboration and Economic Development



Josh Sword
West Virginia AFL-CIO

Since 2017, Josh Sword has served as President of the West Virginia AFL-CIO. He served as Secretary-Treasurer of the organization for four years prior to that. In addition to his duties at the WV AFL-CIO, Sword is a member of the state Workforce Development Board, the board of the AFL-CIO Appalachian Council, and the United Food Operation. He is now President for two arms of the WV AFL-CIO: HRDE, a non-profit organization that provides low-income housing for West Virginia's seniors and disabled, and HRDF, a non-profit organization that provides tools for disadvantaged individuals to succeed in the workplace.

Over the past few years, barely a month has gone by without the announcement of a company bringing hundreds of jobs to West Virginia with innovative manufacturing businesses in new and emerging industries, taking advantage of billions of federal incentive dollars and the promise of a state that offers rare tranquility and incredible natural beauty.

With those businesses comes the ever-increasing need to build upon the state's infrastructure to support and deliver what will be produced. As of March 2024, \$4.7 billion in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding has been directed to West Virginia for over 200 projects. All aspects of the state's infrastructure system are important to this new economy – hard (transportation and utilities); soft (a thorough educational system and efficient law enforcement); and critical (access to housing, healthcare, and childcare). And none of those can be maintained or grown without the most vital infrastructure component of all: West Virginia workers.

As president of the West Virginia AFL-CIO, the umbrella organization for more than 500 affiliated unions, I can confidently state that labor stands ready to collaborate with all interested parties to ensure that



union apprenticeship programs, hire locally, respect every worker's right to organize, and use American-made products. It's been said that this nation is, for the first time in a long time, building an economy from the bottom up and the middle out.

That's an exciting prospect for West Virginia, which would benefit tremendously from a stronger middle class and all the economic prosperity that comes with it. I hope it also signals a turning point in labor's relationship with business.

“When industry and labor communicate early and work together, everyone benefits, especially our communities...”

highly trained, highly skilled, and safe workers are on hand to fill those jobs. There will be strong federal requirements and incentives to pay prevailing wages, utilize

It may not be widely known, but our Building Trades unions and their partner contractors have a long and deep history of training skilled workers. Our Joint Apprenticeship



Training Committees (JACTCs), which represent both management and local unions, direct funds and training to ensure that instructors are teaching the skills necessary for contractors to win bids and produce successful project outcomes. There are a host of skilled apprenticeship programs here – 37 training facilities with territories covering all 55 counties.

Another successful undertaking bringing business and labor together is the use of agreements between business and labor (construction and operations) to address potential workforce challenges on any project, start to finish, known as Memorandum of Agreements (MOA).

When industry and labor communicate early and work together, everyone benefits, especially our communities, and more and more American communities very strongly support the work of unions.

Nearly 9 in 10 (88%) of people under the age of 30 view unions favorably. Among registered voters of all parties, 7 in 10 (71%) approve of labor unions. Three-fourths (75%) support “workers going on strike to negotiate for better wages, benefits, and working conditions.” (GBAO poll – released 8/29/23). According to the U.S. Treasury, unions benefit the middle class by raising members’ wages by 10 to 15%, which also helps raise the wages and benefits of nonunion workers.

Here in West Virginia, the words “labor” and “workforce” are coming out of the mouths of state economic developments officials, politicians of all stripes, and business leaders daily. They say we need to expand our workforce and attract young people. We all want more good-paying jobs for existing West Virginians and would love to see our children and grandchildren who were forced to leave to find work return,

joined by a wave of young people from other parts of the country who are finally realizing what a tremendous quality of life this state has to offer. There are more tech jobs, more start-ups, and our unions are adjusting and shifting along with it.

Unions have never been the enemy of this kind of growth; quite the opposite.

But forces far removed from working West Virginians have spent billions over many decades in an attempt to undermine and weaken unions nationwide. Frankly, we’ve been too busy fighting against the slew of legislation to erode workers’ rights and safety to dedicate much focus on beating back the false narrative.

Luckily for us, our focus is policies and laws that lift up the worker; those that create family-sustaining jobs with good wages and benefits and ensure a safe workplace – fundamental values Americans can agree upon.

Unfortunately, the current political climate fosters far more enemies than allies. Emotions, whether derived from facts or misinformation, rule the day. There is little room for constructive conversation, and therefore hardly any chance of relationship building. This must change.

Pitting unions against job creators serves only out-of-state political interests with social agendas that have nothing to do with securing West Virginia’s future. Many of us in labor and business are already engaged in meaningful conversations about what is needed to build and improve West Virginia’s infrastructure and economy. It is my hope that we can expand those efforts, so that we are all embracing, and benefiting from, this encouraging growth. ▾