

Building Trades to train members as disaster responders

BEND — Building trades unions are taking steps to better prepare their members to respond to disaster situations in Oregon.

Jack Gilchrist, a retired officer of the national Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO and now a consultant for the Center to Protect Workers Rights (CPWR), said his organization has trainers available throughout the United States to train construction workers who can respond to a disaster as skilled support personnel.

Gilchrist was speaking here at the annual convention of the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council Aug. 29-31.

"Worker training after 9-11 was too little too late," Gilchrist said, referring to the attack on the World Trade Center in New York, where scores of construction workers joined firefighters and police at the center following the collapse. But with no real plan in place, many workers put themselves in harm's way.

CPWR has developed a program with assistance from federal agencies to train workers to avoid hazards related to confined spaces, electrical work, construction, hand and power tools, heavy equipment operation, slips, trips and falls, mold, water contamination, respiratory, chemical and biological hazards, and animal and insect bites.

The training program is based on lessons learned at the World Trade Center and Hurricane Katrina. Upon completion of the program, construction workers will be issued a dispatch card that will allow them to respond to a disaster.

"All union workers should be trained in disaster relief," Gilchrist told convention delegates.

Bob Shprack, executive secretary of the OSBCTC, said he and John Mohlis, executive secretary-treasurer of the Columbia Pacific Building Trades Council, have shown the CPWR video to officials from Oregon Homeland Security and fire departments. "They were very impressed with what they saw. We will be doing some training on disaster response very soon," he said.

The concept is simple: If an emergency responder —most likely a fire department — calls for massive aid to resolve a disaster scenario, the call will go to the local building trades executive or his or her designee. A prepared call list will go into effect, with the building trades making the contacts. "Prior to this, local unions will have prepared their members by offering basic command and safety classes, simply so that the craftsman can be used in the most expeditious, effective, and safe manner," Ron Murray, a business agent for Plumbers and Fitters Local 290, told the Northwest Labor Press.

Murray, a former fire chief and emergency medical technician, has been assigned to coordinate the emergency disaster plan for Local 290.

"Whether electricians, iron workers, plumbers or steamfitters, building trades' professionals will be the back-bone of the next disaster response," Murray said.

Oregon has more than a dozen trainers available to deliver the disaster training course.

"Only organized labor has the ability and the desire to mobilize the needed experts in times of dire need," said John Endicott, business manager of Local 290 and vice president of the OSBCTC. "The events at the World Trade Center proved that it was organized labor that came to the aid of the firefighters and community."