

**Testimony of Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA)**

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**Before the House Consumer Affairs Committee  
Public Hearing on Solar Energy**

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The Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) represents over 25,000 men and women in Pennsylvania, including those in my district council as well as two other districts in Western Pennsylvania and Philadelphia. On behalf of our members and their families, I appreciate this opportunity to submit written comments to the House Consumer Affairs Committee regarding our workforce participation and interests in Pennsylvania's solar energy industry.

To provide background, please know that throughout the United States and Canada, LIUNA members perform a range of construction work, among other occupations, in the public and private sectors. Traditionally, our members are responsible for building and maintaining much of our country's infrastructure, including roads and bridges, schools, commercial buildings, as well as utility and energy systems. Our organization provides specialized training to ensure that the range of construction work that we do is completed to the highest industry standards with the utmost regard to workplace and public safety.

In exchange for their training and skills, LIUNA members earn a middle-class wage, receive affordable health insurance for their families, and gain a retirement benefit that allows them to age with dignity. And, because LIUNA members live in or near the communities where they work, they spend their earnings at local businesses, pay local and state taxes, utilize their insurance benefits at local hospitals, and continue to support the local economy with their retirement earnings long after they stop working.

Our organization supports an "all of the above" energy policy. This means that we understand both the reality that our economy depends on a diverse energy portfolio to meet demand as well as the strong desire to improve the transition to renewable and clean energy sources to address climate change. Therefore, we make certain that our union members are trained and ready to work in the construction of all energy systems—from power plants and pipelines to wind turbines and solar panels. The LIUNA district councils in Pennsylvania alone operate four training centers located throughout the state. As renewable energy grows in Pennsylvania and other states, our members are increasingly learning new skills and technologies to do our part in constructing those systems.

Training is critical to the employment model that will give Pennsylvanians access to a career through solar. Solar construction is often short, lasting only a few months, but the solar skills that LIUNA members learn can be put towards other construction sectors. A partnership with LIUNA guarantees contractors a steady supply of workers, and guarantees workers a steady supply of projects.

We are supportive of investments in energy infrastructure. It cannot be understated that our work in energy construction has provided long-term careers for many of our members and has enabled them to be productive members in their communities. These construction jobs have allowed many blue-collar workers to live the American dream.

However, we are concerned that the transition to solar and renewables may undermine these employment opportunities for our members. Because the solar energy industry is fairly new, LIUNA has been

working diligently to build partnerships with its developers and contractors. Unfortunately, solar power is all too often constructed with a low-wage and limited-benefits business model. In many cases, solar developers use contractors who do not seek to employ local workers and pay much lower wages than what skilled construction workers earn in the local labor market.

Oftentimes, the creation of renewable energy jobs is lauded without any view of the quality of these new jobs or whether these jobs employ workers from the local community. For example, proponents of the proposed regulation enabling the state to join the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative boast of the potential of 30,000 new jobs; however, the proposal is unclear on where those jobs may be and what they may pay. Instead of building a renewable energy sector on cheap, unskilled labor, we believe that any new source of energy added to our energy infrastructure should be built with skilled labor at a fair wage.

In our general experience, construction industry jobs created by solar energy are far inferior to the jobs created by conventional power sources, unless those jobs are covered by a strong project labor agreement or collective bargaining agreement. Instead of hiring local workers, solar facilities are often installed by workers who travel from outside the local area and then leave as soon as the project is completed. This practice is harmful, because it not only excludes the local, qualified workforce, but also lowers the labor standards that local workers and unions like LIUNA have worked to build over generations. The local community also suffers from this practice through loss of local spending and tax revenue.

LIUNA has already seen the suffering in other parts of the Mid-Atlantic Region. For example, in researching how Virginia's solar projects compared to Virginia's natural gas projects from the workers' perspective, we found that the average wage for construction workers on solar was about 50% less than the average wage for natural gas and lacked health and retirement benefits offered in natural gas. The vast majority of workers on sites were from out of state, accounting for an estimated 70% to 90% of manhours. Moreover, we found that citations were issued for a series of erosion and sediment control violations on these projects, which only further emphasizes our view that a qualified construction workforce is always imperative.

Concerns about the poor quality of jobs in solar energy have been expressed by others as well, including the recent and notable article in *The New York Times*, "Building Solar Farms May Not Build the Middle Class," by Noam Scheiber. The article reviewed industry employment practices that we have seen occur first-hand and identified state action to ensure that the energy transition continues to safeguard local labor standards, workers, and communities from becoming collateral damage in the haste to move to solar power.

Pennsylvania has a strong energy portfolio and strong energy workforce, and this relationship has been cultivated over generations. According to the United States Energy Information Administration, Pennsylvania is the second highest energy producer in the nation and the third largest generator of electricity. For more than a century, international and local unions have built long-standing relationships with natural gas, coal, nuclear, and other energy companies and contractors, which have set the standard in terms of wages and benefits for our members and have helped empower America's middle class families. Contractors in these industries know that our partnership ensures a pool of qualified labor in order to complete work safely, on-time, and on-budget. Energy construction work is—and should continue to be—good paying work for local, properly trained workers. We would like to see solar jobs join these ranks.

Accordingly, as solar and other renewable systems supplement or displace conventional energy, we believe that thoughtful and proactive leadership by legislators, regulators, companies, and developers is necessary to mitigate potential damages to hard-fought labor standards and to assure equity to our existing and future workforce. Several other states have risen to the challenge by enacting laws that require labor

standards on renewable energy projects, some based on public incentives and others across the board—these states include New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, Connecticut, Maine, Minnesota, and Oregon. In Pennsylvania too, several bills have been introduced to attach labor standards to any legislated growth or public incentive for the solar industry, and we applaud those efforts.

We recommend that Pennsylvania continue to build on the work to curb low-wage practices in the solar energy industry by considering all of the following:

- Specifically identifying how solar energy construction wage and benefit levels compare to other local labor market and prevailing wage rates, which are often the rates used in utility construction.
- Ensuring that workers are hired from local communities and paid family-sustaining wages and benefits so that workers continue to spend their wages locally and contribute to their communities.
- Requiring any expansion of solar to utilize and grow our existing skilled construction workforce and workforce development programs by contributing to the growth of our first class registered apprenticeship programs.
- Making sure that construction workers on projects are treated as employees rather than independent contractors.

Pennsylvania has a significant opportunity to be at the forefront of states by establishing fair and clear labor standards for the construction of solar and renewable energy systems. We hope that you will continue to work closely with LIUNA and similar stakeholders who represent Pennsylvania's workforce in order to design these fair labor standards. We urge you to consider the solutions we have recommended and look forward to working with you as you consider legislation on this topic.

Thank you for your time and attention. Should you have any questions, we are glad to discuss this matter further at your convenience.