Local 550 Lobbies Congress to Stop Unnecessary Layoffs

A change in the Department of Energy’s (DOE) work scope for the cleanup of the former Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant (PGDP) in Kentucky will cause the unnecessary layoff of 103 USW workers in October 2017, according to Local 550.

A work scope defines the type of activity to be performed in an agreement between the DOE and a contractor. (See the accompanying story about the work scope change.)

Local 550 members are lobbying Congress to pressure the DOE into adding more work scopes into its contract with new Paducah deactivation contractor Four Rivers Nuclear Partnershhip (FRNP) so those who are likely to be laid off can still work on the massive cleanup job.

“There is other available work at the Paducah plant,” said Local 550 Vice President Jim Key. “DOE can direct the new contractor to perform the additional work, and it will not cost any more money. Congress already has appropriated the necessary funds as requested for Fiscal Year (FY) 17, so we shouldn’t have this layoff.”

A major problem, Key said, is that DOE directed all bidding contractors for the new work scope to place their bids to $140 million for the agency’s Request for Proposal (RFP). This was $30 million less than what the current operating costs are for the PGDP cleanup project.

Local 550’s concern is that DOE will take the leftover Paducah-allotted funds and use them elsewhere in the nuclear complex.

DOE led Congress to believe that with its appropriation the cleanup work at the Paducah site would continue for a long time and keep workers employed.

U.S. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Sen. Rand Paul, and Rep. James Comer released a statement regarding the layoff announcement, calling it “a serious disappointment.” They urged DOE Secretary Rick Perry to visit the Paducah site, and demanded “information from DOE and its partners on the justification for this planned reduction in workforce and its impact on operations at the site.”

WARN Notice Sent

DOE’s contracts with contractors Fluor Federal Services (Fluor) and LATA-Sharp Remediation Services (LATA) ends Oct. 19, 2017. LATA was a subcontractor to prime contractor Fluor and handled all the waste management responsibilities related to the deactivation work that Fluor handled.

LATA sent out WARN (Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act) letters dated Aug. 15, 2017 to their employees.

Key said the USW successfully inserted a union recognition clause into DOE’s RFP for contractors to bid on the new work scope. Now, the union has a “follow-on” agreement with FRNP, and Fluor’s USW-represented workers will transition to the new contractor—except for the 86 operators who were hired to shoot the uranium enrichment cells with Chlorine Trifluoride (CLF3) to remove uranium deposits.

At LATA, 17 USW-represented employees will be impacted by the layoff, Key said, and the contractor said the layoffs would be handled in accordance with the collective bargaining agreement (CBA).

Those who have not found a job with FRNP by Oct. 19, 2017 will be laid off. Key said FRNP posted mostly managerial, professional and administrative job listings on the bulletin boards—positions the operators and LATA workers cannot perform for lack of qualifications. Hence, the importance of DOE adding additional work scopes to FRNP.

What You Can Do

Local 550 said that Congress needs to pressure DOE to assign additional scopes of work to FRNP. They urged USW workers to contact the following key senators and representative:

**Senator Mitch McConnell**
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510
Phone (202) 224-2541
Fax (202) 224-2499

**Senator Rand Paul**
208 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510
Phone (202) 224-4343
Fax (202) 228-6917

**Rep. James Comer**
1513 Longworth HOB
Washington, D.C. 20515
Phone (202) 225-3115

The unnecessary layoff of USW cleanup workers at the former Paducah, Ky., Gaseous Diffusion Plant affects folks like the people in this photo. Here, USW Local 550 sponsors a childhood cancer walk.
Energy Department Alters Cleanup Work at Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant

The Department of Energy (DOE) decided to change how deposits of uranium should be removed from process equipment at the former Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant (PGDP). This will result in layoffs (see accompanying story).

The change in the cleanup project also coincided with a new prime contractor and subcontractor. DOE’s three-year deactivation contract with Fluor Federal Services (Fluor) and Fluor’s subcontractor, LATA-Sharp Remediation Services (LATA), ends Oct. 19, 2017.

Fluor’s work scope—the type of work to be performed under the legal agreement between the contractors and DOE—include optimizing the site’s utilities and infrastructure to support reduced operations and energy needs, facility surveillance and maintenance, deactivation, and waste management.

Deactivation involves removing radioactive and hazardous materials from process equipment, shutting down facility systems, and de-energizing equipment in preparation for future decontamination and decommissioning (D&D).

LATA was a subcontractor to Fluor and handled all the waste management responsibilities related to the deactivation work that Fluor handled.

To handle the new work scope, DOE in May 2017 awarded a five-year, $1.49 billion contract to Four Rivers Nuclear Partners (FRNP), with the possibility of two 2-year contract extensions and one, 1-year contract extension if the company meets DOE’s goals. C2HM Hill is the lead company in the partnership with BWX Technologies and Fluor Corporation as partners.

Wastren Advantage Inc. (WAI) will be the subcontractor to FRNP and take over LATA’s work.

Eliminating Residual Uranium

Historically, USW operators have shot the cells in the uranium enrichment process equipment with an extremely dangerous chemical compound called Chlorine Trifluoride (CLF3), a colorless, toxic, corrosive, and incredibly reactive substance that can even burn asbestos and ashes.

The “cells” are a series of converters, compressors and motors connected together in the uranium gaseous diffusion process.

“DOE decided not to shoot the production and enrichment cells to remove any residual uranium,” said Local 550 Vice President Jim Key. “The agency doesn’t know the quantity of uranium left over or where it is located in the cells.”

He said DOE decided to use nuclear detection analysis equipment to determine where remaining uranium deposits are located within the four large cascade process buildings where the uranium was enriched.

Once the deposits are found, mechanical means—cutting apart converters, compressors and other uranium enrichment piping—will be used to remove the deposits and re-containerize them for disposal into long-term storage.

Contaminated Groundwater Plume

Key said that the DOE also has a Federal Facilities agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to completely clean and tear down the C-400 chemical processing unit to slab by fall 2018.

Underneath the building is a groundwater plume contaminated with Tricloethylene (TCE), a chlorinated solvent that was used for the cleaning of equipment from the operation of PGDP in 1952 until May 31, 2013. TCE can cause liver damage and increase the risk of cancer.

It is estimated the contaminated groundwater could fill 16,000 Olympic-size swimming pools. The plant itself is three miles from the Ohio River, and Key said the plume has almost reached there. He said the amount of time the plume will reach the Ohio River is under debate.

FRNP will tackle this C-400 job, and it also has to remove the soil sediment that contains TCE.

Key said that USW workers will remove the equipment from the C-400 unit and box it up for likely off-site shipment to the non-union Waste Control Specialists LLC site in West Texas.

He said USW workers also will remove transite asbestos panels by hand. The C-400 building was paneled entirely with Johns-Manville brand transite siding—an early form of cement composite drywall panel containing up to 50 percent asbestos.

In addition, he said USW workers will also remove the steel skeletal structure remaining after the equipment and panels are removed.

Origin of Contamination

The gaseous diffusion process was used at PGDP to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons and nuclear fuel rods for commercial reactors from 1952-2013.

Uranium, composed of isotopes U-235 and U-238, was mixed with fluorine gas to form uranium hexafluoride (UF6) and pumped under high pressure through a series of permeable membranes or barriers located in large tanks called converters. U-235 separated from U-238 because it was lighter and moved through the barriers more quickly.

After passing through 1,760 converters, the uranium was enriched to a concentration of two to five percent U-235 that was used for nuclear weapons and nuclear fuel rods.
Piketon Local Union Trains Workers in Response to Radiation Control Technician Shortage

A shortage of Radiological Control Technicians (RCTs) for cleanup work at the former Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant (PGDP) in Piketon, Ohio, prompted Local 1-689 to proactively offer an RCT course this fall for current workers to gain more skills and community members seeking high-paid employment at the site.

“I don’t think people realize how important this course is,” said Local 1-689 President Herman Potter. “This class applies to jobs across the Department of Energy (DOE) complex. Outside of these facilities, RCTs have not been cultivated, so we don’t have many out there.”

The end result, he said, is that RCTs bounce back and forth across the DOE sites to the highest bidder, so there is no longevity.

“We thought that if we train our own RCTs and help people in the community, these folks would stay at home and remain at the plant,” Herman said.

He said the Piketon plant is short 40-60 RCTs, and needs senior RCTs, despite there not being many senior RCT classes available.

“Even after people finish the RCT class, it takes two to three years to become a senior RCT before being qualified, regulatory-wise, for shipping radioactive and hazardous waste,” Herman said. “The atomic industry is historically behind in training RCTs. Our union is jumping in and filling that void. At our site, all the RCTs are USW-represented.”

Cross-Training Opportunity

RCT training also is open to existing workers at Piketon who want additional skills to maintain employment as the work scope and skill mix requirements change.

“As the Decontamination & Decommissioning (D&D) project progresses, there will be a shift in the work scope. We wanted to be proactive with our employees and offer training that will allow them to move right into the new positions. We also wanted to offer training to potential new hires from our community,” Herman said.

RCTs check for radioactive contamination at the plant, such as worker locker areas and places where people eat, and they monitor work processes for contamination. They check individuals for contamination, conduct an individual monitoring program, do bioassays, and handle work that involves health physics. If there is contamination, they tell others where to establish boundaries, so no one walks through the area and it gets cleaned up. They also classify an area to establish that a respirator is needed.

Starting out, junior RCTs earn $22-$24 an hour. After gaining experience in two to three years, RCTs’ union wage jumps to about $28-$32 an hour. In five years, the union wage jumps to $38-$42 per hour.

Classes Are Free

The RCT class began Sept. 6, 2017 and continues through January 2018. The training is free and includes trainers, books and class materials.

The USW Tony Mazzocchi Center (USWTMC) obtained a grant under award UH4ES009761 from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences that is under the National Institute of Health to provide hazardous materials (HAZMAT) training at DOE nuclear weapon complexes. This grant includes trainers, books and class materials for courses like the RCT training.

Local 1-689 has a partnership with USWTMC to provide safety and technical training to prepare qualifying individuals, who are at least 18 years old prior to the start of a course, for employment opportunities at the Piketon site.

Marybeth Potter, Local 1-689 member and training coordinator with the USWTMC, said that six full-time RCTs from the Piketon site and one full-time USW safety representative will teach the course.

“We felt they were the most qualified to be the trainers teaching this technical curriculum,” she said.

Reciprocity across DOE Complex

Marybeth said the worker-trainers traveled to the DOE Training Institute (DTI) at the Hanford, Wash., nuclear reservation to become DTI-certified trainers. People taught by DTI-certified trainers using DTI’s curriculum receive training that has reciprocity across the DOE complex and enables them to get a job at any of the DOE sites.

She said that RCT students learn 13 modules of DOE core curriculum material, such as internal/external exposure control, math, sources of radiation, biological effects of radiation, and the radiation protection standard. They also learn 19 modules of site specific material, such as general dosimetry, (continued on page 4)
Community Support

To make the RCT class a reality, Local 1-689 obtained the help and support of the community. The Village of Piketon and Local 1-689 signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in February 2017 for the town to provide classroom space at no charge for the RCT and future training. The two groups formed a partnership called the Energy Industry Training Consortium (EITC).

“The Village of Piketon supports our local work force, and we are happy to provide the space for this training free of charge to the USW,” said Piketon Mayor Billy Spencer. “The training these guys put on is top notch.”

EITC also is in partnership with DTI, USWTMC and the Pike County Career Technical Center. The technical center helps the local union qualify students by conducting WorkKeys testing, which measure’s a person’s math and comprehension abilities to determine if he or she has the skills to successfully complete the RCT class and energy industry training.

Marybeth said the center screened 80 people, and about 60 successfully passed the testing criteria and received application packets. Then a screening committee reviewed each numbered application packet—disguised not to reveal the person’s name—to examine items like the applicants’ resumes, educational experience, military service and references.

The committee picked the top 20 applicants, plus 10 alternates, Marybeth said. All 20 must go through a background check and drug screening to be eligible for a future security clearance for DOE sites. If someone does not pass, he or she will be replaced by an alternate. Each RCT class has 20 students.

Other Free Training

Everyone who passed the WorkKeys testing, whether or not they were chosen for the current RCT class, will be offered a free OSHA 30-hour and 40-hour hazardous operation emergency response class.

“This will provide them with other certificates that can increase their chance of getting into the next RCT class,” Marybeth said. “Having those credentials reduces costs for contractors so they do not have to pull people out for Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response (HAZWOPER) training after they are hired.”

Local 1-689 and its partners plan to add other courses in the future, including the OSHA 30-hour and 40-hour classes, HAZWOPER, Radiological Worker 1 & 11, and industrial hygiene.