

Union leaders

call for federal help

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Local union officials are calling for assistance from the federal government for service workers whose jobs are sent overseas.

"People are losing jobs in West Virginia, and trade assistance needs to extend beyond the manufacturing industry," said Elaine Harris, an international representative for the Communication Workers of America.

Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., and nine other senators had been pushing for an amendment in the Central American Free Trade Agreement that would extend certain benefits to laid off employees in the service industry. The benefits would include retraining, income support and health insurance tax credits.

The Senate Finance Committee passed the final version of the agreement Wednesday, but it didn't include Sen. Rockefeller's provision, which would have provided \$220 million in support for those in the telecommunications and construction industries.

"In West Virginia and across the country, we've seen thousands of workers lose their jobs as a result of trade policies," Sen. Rockefeller said.

Harris said these benefits are sorely needed after the Charleston AT&T Call Center laid off 352 workers in 2003 because of foreign competition.

"The work that used to be done in Charleston is now done in India," Harris said. "Our people need training for other professions."

She said members of the union are losing jobs nationwide due to foreign competition and need the benefits of trade assistance.

"Outsourcing is affecting a lot of people," she said. "It only makes sense to include the telecommunications industry."

Steve White, director of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation, said the construction industry is experiencing the same troubles.

Thousands of West Virginia construction workers make their living at manufacturing sites doing repairs and maintenance.

White said layoffs at the Dow Chemical Co. and other plants in West Virginia have leveled a serious blow to many employees.

"We're definitely feeling the hurt from foreign competition," he said. "The jobs we normally work on a regular basis either don't exist anymore, or they're not spending any money on construction."

If the assistance were extended to the construction industry, people who had been losing employment opportunities would have access to more skills, White said.

For example, an electrician who worked in a chemical plant could be trained in fiber optics, he said.

"Construction makes up five percent of the work force. It's not a temporary job -- thousands of people make a living everyday as a construction worker," he said.

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