

Burton a part of major construction projects

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ASHLAND -- If there's a multimillion dollar project going on somewhere in the Tri-State, chances are Steve Burton will have had a hand in it.

Steve Burton is the business manager for the Tri-State Buildings and Construction Trades Council in Ashland.

Expansions at Cabell Huntington Hospital, Marshall University, King's Daughters Medical Center, Sun Coke, AEP, the Piketon Uranium Enrichment Plant and a new Ironton Elementary School and Ironton Middle School are just some of the jobs that employ union workers represented by the council.

"They come to us because we have the trained people," Burton said Thursday. "We're meeting their budgets and their time schedules."

The construction and trades council was formed in 1974 and had union members working some 6.5 million hours until the bottom fell out of construction projects in the area in the early to mid 1980s, Burton said. Work started picking back up in 1988 and now the union members work between 8.5 and 9 million hours a year on local construction projects, he said.

While unions across the country are facing declining membership, the construction and building trades union is going up, he said.

"We are strong here," Burton said. "Our members contribute to a very good economy in the Tri-State and a way of life. Our members are buying homes and feeding, clothing and educating their children."

Those workers include union carpenters, pipefitters, electricians, painters, bricklayers, laborers, operators, boilermakers, millwrights, teamsters, cement masons, roofers, sheet metal workers, ironworkers, asbestos workers and sprinkler fitters. All the locals have apprenticeship programs that start hiring in the spring, Burton said.

"Steve is a great guy and those union craft people do good work," said Rob Slagel, owner and president of Portable Solutions Group in Ironton. Representatives from AEP, Duke Power and Sun Coke have bragged on the quality of skilled labor in the Tri-State, he said.

"They said the skilled union labor here is as good or better than any they've seen in the country," Slagel said. "When they sign these multi-million dollar contracts, they know they're going to get skilled labor to do the work."

The average wages the union workers make, plus health and retirement benefits, ranges between \$40 and \$50 per hour. While a lot of jobs are seasonal, there are some projects that can last longer than a year or even longer, Burton said.

"Those type of jobs mean security; it means you can make plans," Burton said.

The average age of local construction workers is 47 years old, he said.

"We lost a generation with the problems in the 1980s," he said. "There are good job opportunities in this business, especially for people with math and computer skills. We're getting more people with two-year, associate degrees. The more education you have, the better it is."

The council hasn't had a strike since 1978 and its current, five-year contract runs through May 31, 2010. The union also supports drug testing and has been doing that since 1992, Burton said.

"We police ourselves," he said.

The council also supports drug prevention programs in Tri-State schools, he said.