

**INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD OF  
ELECTRICAL WORKERS**



**LOCAL 99**

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Representative Marvin L. Abney  
Chair, House Finance Committee  
Rhode Island State House  
Providence, RI 02903  
[HouseFinance@rilegislature.gov](mailto:HouseFinance@rilegislature.gov)

**RE: H-7755 AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT- GOVERNOR'S CLEAN ENERGY WORKFORCE  
TRANSITION COMMISSION**

Dear Chairman Abney,

As Business Manager of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local Union 99, I represent 800 Women and Men who provide their skills for our seventy-four signatory contractors in the Electrical Industry in the State of Rhode Island and nearby Massachusetts. I also am one of, if not the only voice for the men and women who are not yet fortunate enough to be represented by an electrical labor union in the state of Rhode Island.

I wish to express our support for H-7755 however, I do wish to have my testimony read by the committee and on file whereas I believe many are unfamiliar with the overall opportunities and their limitations.

The men and women of Local 99 have been in the renewable energy business for decades. We started to engage deeper in 2008 when we installed the largest solar installation in the State of Rhode Island, at that time, on our own facility. A whopping 50 KW system. As we know, the industry has grown to where systems 1000 times that size are becoming routine in Rhode Island.

What you may not know is that many years ago my predecessor, Michael Daley, and I worked with the Department of Labor and other industry interests to ensure the solar division of the electrical industry could blossom. In a most unusual action for a leader in organized labor, BM Daley directed me to work on this project so we could allow solar developers to: *solicit, bid, or advertise* for solar installations. This was a right solely owned by legitimate licensed electrical contractors, as mandated by statute, before our participation.

Understanding that a climate crisis was and is imminent, we took this bold step to modify our laws and assist in growth of the business development vision. This effectively created the opportunity of a solar industry in Rhode Island. Since that time, we have had our men and women dominating the market in both residential and utility scale installations. We have worked at the state and municipal level to advance many projects, we have been constantly training our people in every aspect of the industry and we have been the watchman to ensure the public is kept safe by making sure the license laws in this state are enforced.

I think the concept of a Clean Energy Transition Commission is overall a useful tool. However, the more conversations I have, the more I discover that most people, even in the industry, are not well versed on the topic. I wanted to shed some light on the different beliefs and realities of the renewable world.



One of the big misconceptions is that we must train scores of new people to do this new work. The reality is that this work is not new, and it has replaced other work that is no longer performed. There are of course opportunities through apprenticeship for any who are interested. Those opportunities are available today and do not need *just transition* to move forward.

Another misconception is that we should be moving fossil fuel workers over to the renewable trades. Again, if a fossil fuel worker wants to enter into apprenticeship, that opportunity is available right now. However, the reality is a union fossil fuel worker is unlikely willing to engage in an apprenticeship program that involves five years of night school and five years of on the job training and certainly a considerable reduction in pay.

Equally as important and worthy of sincere and passionate discussion is how we at the IBEW recruit our new people. I now sit as Business Manager in a local union that denied me apprenticeship four times many decades ago. I ultimately gained membership and persevered. As I rose through the ranks over more than three decades, I swore I was the person to open those doors that often needed a secret handshake to get through. Local 99 was incredibly fortunate that Business Manager Daley also embraced that philosophy.

I came on board as the union organizer in 2011 and started changing the lives of electricians who were living a life of exploitation in the open-shop. When I was installed on the Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee in 2016, I made my position clear. I would vote for anyone who belonged here and I did not care one bit who knew who or what politician called for a favor.

When minorities, women, economically disadvantaged, and formally incarcerated applied, they had a fair chance, probably for many this was the first time in their lives. Many of those men and women now earn tremendous livings as journey level workers and in leadership positions that once were unheard of.

I do not have any particular issue with *just transition* but everyone in the conversation must understand there will not be unlimited positions for new people. As a matter of fact, I would muse that we as the industry will not increase much past the retirement replacement forecast. There may be spikes and there will equally be lulls. Again, this work is not additional work for the most part, it is replacement work for other work lost as happens constantly in the trades.

This bill does address lifting those out of poverty, which is terrific, but it also suggests there will also be a place for the fossil fuel worker who, I would imagine, had the well-paying union job for the past many years. I would suspect, that it is not the case of unlimited opportunity. When evaluating new people into our program, we will always gravitate to the hungry new person who needs the hand up, not to someone who already had a rewarding career and now wants a second shot. I am a huge supporter of job retraining for any and all jobs lost to offshoring, automation, and situations such as this. I do not believe those options should be focused just on this industry whereas I believe we will be over preparing people for an opportunity that is not as grandiose as you may believe.

I will further say there are significant roadblocks in the world of renewable energy. Particularly the Solar industry which is basically all work that requires an electrical license or indentured apprenticeship in the electrical field. We are working with our environmental partners to try to find solutions to impacts on our forested areas while still meeting our renewable goals. At this time, we have a great conversation but no funding and no legitimate plan. The uncertainty of what Rhode Island solar installations will or will not be allowed going forward literally can freeze the industry where it sits. I see no resolution in that until the State or the Federal Government provide massive funding for data and preparing more desirable sites and the infrastructure to support them.

Another roadblock in the solar world that threatens many of my members is the fact that United States Chamber of Commerce is considering slapping significant tariffs on panels that are imported from Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam due to the suspicion these panels and/or components are actually from China. China has had a tariff since 2011 for punishment of dumping panels into the US market. That tariff on Chinese panels currently sits at 250%. Those who know me, know well that I would always buy American when possible, even at a premium. Supporting American jobs has so many positive ancillary impacts to our nation that are so often overlooked. With that said, I love the thought of punishing countries who wish to destroy our economy and shutter our manufacturing facilities on American soil.

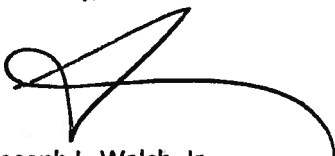
However, it is critical to realize that if the Commerce department does take that action, it is all over. It will take massive investment and years to get American manufacturing up to speed to feed the market. Last week the Solar Energy Industries Association polled over 200 of their members from every aspect of the market and found 60% or more of the respondents are already suffering "devastating negative impacts" from the investigation. This investigation will take 150-300 days to perform and the outcome could cause more unrest in an already uncertain market.

There is also concerning language on developing new apprenticeship models. All of the organized trades and presumably the unrepresented trades are already training in all new technologies for a decade or more. That training does not stray much from the training the organized trades have perfected over the last century. The only part of a renewable project that differs from our everyday work would be the actual offshore work for wind farms. Other than the normal every day type of work we currently do, workers will be required to have GWO (Global Wind Organization) certificates. This is an expensive and time consuming endeavor for all of us and unlikely anyone will invest in someone who was not already a master of his or her craft. I also do not believe that people realize the speed that a turbine goes in the sky. We are talking a few days for each turbine, not months. Most of the work is on land and hardly distinguishable from the everyday work the Building Trades do every day on every project.

Where I believe the *just transition* is being overlooked is on infrastructure. There will be an absolute need to create the infrastructure to bring all of the renewables on-line and to support the massive increase in energy consumption from electric vehicles, electric boilers, electric ranges etc. I doubt there is even a plan for how we intend to accomplish this massive undertaking. The utility should be cross training their fossil fuel workers into overhead and underground line construction right now. That field is already understaffed and about to suffer the same boomer retirement pains every business will. I would presume the utility, whomever they may be, will need a significant amount of new people to ensure we have a reliable infrastructure by 2030.

In conclusion, I do believe this commission is a positive move and I hope to be involved on it. Solar forecasts, legislation, supply chain, and all the other ingredients to make this industry successful are on my plate every single day. I do know that it will be imperative to have extremely accurate data on the work predicted, the people available, and honest and realistic plans on how we will realize the vision of a better world for all. One thing we don't need is people training for a job that may not exist only to have another opportunity pass right by them. I wish to urge passage *H-7755* with consideration to my comments.

Sincerely,



Joseph L. Walsh, Jr.

cc:

Paul Macdonald / Lobbyist  
Esteemed Committee Members  
RI AFL-CIO  
Climate Jobs RI  
BuildRI  
Rhode Island Building and Construction Trades