

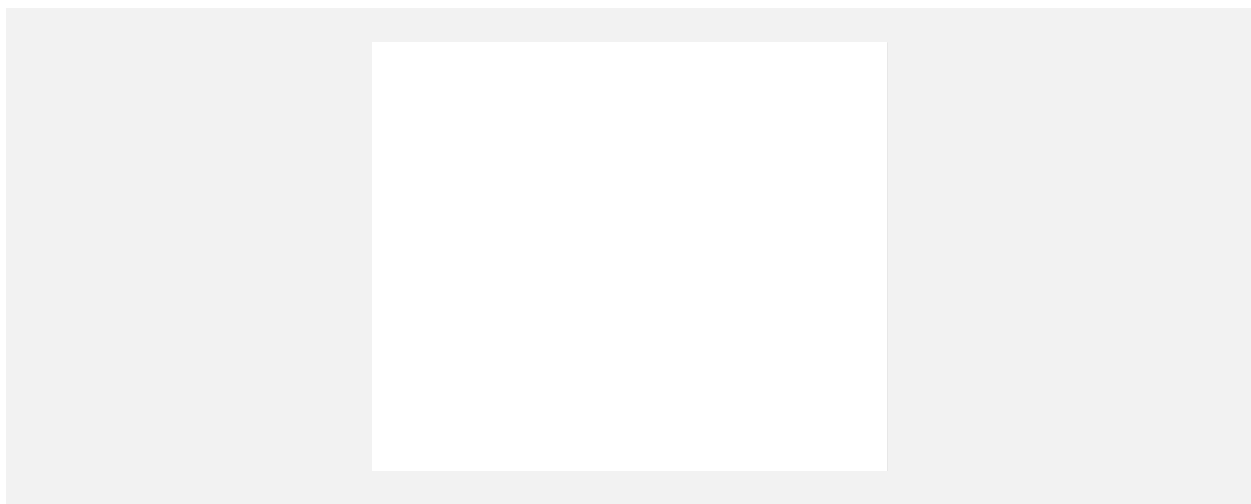
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"It makes you want to give up." Keystone workers feel left behind by Biden executive orders

BY CARA KORTE
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carrying carbon-heavy oil south from Canada to the Gulf Coast.



The pipeline was an obstacle to Mr. Biden's campaign promise to create 10

million clean energy jobs. The order nixing it stated the pipeline "would not serve the U.S. national interest" and said the U.S. "must prioritize the development of a clean energy economy, which will in turn create good jobs."

Pipelines are built seasonally for 19 ½ weeks at a time, on average, so the jobs created to build them are considered short-term. In 2014, the State Department estimated that Keystone would employ 10,400 workers over multiple construction seasons, thereby adding up to 3,900 jobs.

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Now, without a pipeline to construct, hundreds of workers are unemployed. According to TC Energy, the Canadian company building Keystone, "nearly 1,000" laborers were laid off as a result of the executive order.



Pipeline worker Ron Berringer
PHOTO PROVIDED BY RON BERRINGER

Ron Berringer is one of them.

Berringer, 60, is a union steward from Clarinda, Iowa, who has worked on pipelines for decades across seven states – just like his father before him and his three brothers today.

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"[I was told], 'Well, your dad was a steward for us and if you do half the job he did, you'll be doing us a great job.' And I knew right then that's what I wanted to do, is continue on and follow in his footsteps," Berringer told CBS News, recalling the beginning of his career in pipeline construction thirty years ago.

The sense of community, plus good benefits and wages, are what make pipeline work so appealing. Berringer said he's scheduled to work six days a week, ten hours a day, meaning there's the constant promise of twenty hours of overtime.

He calls it the best job he ever had – his "bread and butter."

Without that financial boost, Berringer says his future looks "gloomy." He can no longer plan on replacing his pickup truck, which has logged 450,000 miles building pipelines. And he'll have to reduce the financial help he's used to sending his two adult daughters.

Before the pipeline construction was halted, Berringer said friends inside and

outside his union, the Laborers' International Union of North America (LiUNA) Local 1140 in Omaha, approached him "daily" to ask about working on Keystone. He said people were often confused about the pipeline's fate because construction stopped and started as a result of Obama and Trump executive orders.

To these workers, pipelining is more than a livelihood. As a member of LiUNA Local 620, Tyler Noel, 33, said the bonds he's forged working on pipelines for thirteen years is "the only thing I've got right now."



Pipeline worker Tyler Noel
PHOTO PROVIDED BY TYLER NOEL

Noel is based in Aberdeen, South Dakota, but spent the last five and a half

months of 2020 working on Keystone, about 215 miles away in Murdo, South Dakota. Pipeline laborers relocate for long periods of time during construction, often living in local motels or hauling their own campers.

"It's not just a job, it's like a lifestyle," Noel said. "The only people I talk to are family members and pipeliners."

Without the promise of Keystone, Noel finds himself at a "crossroads." Work in Murdo ended in December. He has not received a stimulus check. As a result, Noel has been forced to refinance his truck and knows others who have refinanced their homes.

"You cannot get a hold of [Employment Services]. You cannot," he said. "And, you know, I've paid beaucoup money to states by working in them. I'm entitled to unemployment."

Noel is worried about the possibility that the Biden administration could revoke other pipeline opportunities, especially since he'll need to accrue more hours on the job in order to be eligible for his pension.

"Anything that was coming in the next few months was supposed to be Keystone," he said. "If I hadn't saved my money through the years I would really be in a bind. But I'd say I've got at least three months, then I'm gonna have to do something."

What now?

Upon signing a trio of climate-related executive orders last month, Mr. Biden said, "Today is 'Climate Day' at the White House, which means today is 'Jobs Day' at the White House."

Climate Envoy John Kerry told reporters that workers in the oil and gas industry

"can be the people who go to work to make the solar panels."

But Berringer and Noel aren't convinced.

Both said their best hope is to find work maintaining existing pipelines.

Berringer, who is now working at a power plant in Omaha, says he's worked on wind turbine installation in the past and found the work to be "piddly" and less satisfying because it doesn't offer the same overtime benefits as pipeline work.

"Every time I do jobs like that, I'm thinking, 'Why am I here? I should be on a pipeline,'" he said.

The Biden executive order emphasizes moving workers into new jobs, but is vague about the details.

"These jobs will create opportunities for young people and for older workers shifting to new professions," the order states. And it will "maximize the creation of accessible training opportunities and good jobs."

Any movement on this front is likely to have to originate with legislation from Congress.

For Noel, the idea of transitioning from his long-practiced trade to a new one is "just crazy."

"It's easy for welders," he said. "I'm a foreman. My trade is in labor. The money is so much better running a crew. I wouldn't be anywhere near that doing a wind turbine, which I've never done."

President Biden's nominee to be energy secretary, former Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, said in her recent confirmation hearing that she thought the

president's economic plan would create more jobs in clean energy "than the

jobs that might be sacrificed."

Noel says he'd like to believe Granholm and the Biden administration will be true to their word but already feels like he's starting from square one.

"If you do a task, do a job, for thirteen years, you'd like to think in thirteen years you'd be somewhat comfortable and then not have to worry about a job," Noel said. "What was the last thirteen years for? The last thirteen years of being out on the road, being away from family and for what? For me to be sitting here right now talking to you about this?"

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CBS News reporter covering the environment.

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