

HB 1543_FAV_ClimateXchange
Revised/supplemental testimony

In “Carbon pricing represents the best answer to our climate danger,” an op-end yesterday by Sheldon Whitehouse and James Slevin in the Washington Post, Whitehouse, Democratic Senator from Rhode Island and Slevin, president of the Utility Workers Union of America joined forces “to address the twin threats of a changing climate and growing economic inequality.”

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/carbon-pricing-represents-...danger/2020/03/10/379693ae-62fb-11ea-acc80c22bbee96f_story.html

They propose, as many other have, a price on carbon, “not the usual position for the leader of a union whose members work in the energy industry.”

But their “path forward also features a new, and newly respectful, way of talking about the about the men and women who took on the difficult and dangerous tasks of producing such fuels for our economy.”

They propose that the revenues from imposing a price on carbon be used “in a way that helps workers, families, and communities.”

I feel a deep personal connection to coal.

I suffered from asthma as a child and my last employment was in environmental economics, evaluating the health costs of fine particle pollution from diesel, but also produced by coal.

My father’s father was a national authority on coal who was called to testify before Congressional committees on energy during both world wars.

But his expertise would have done little to help those wars and the economic growth of the last 75 years without the difficult and dangerous labor of many generations of coal miners who suffered black lung and other pulmonary diseases from the fine particles of coal dust that settled in their lungs, slowly smothering them.

The coal miners were more critical to winning the wars and building the post-war economy than was my grandfather's expertise on coal, and equal to the military contributions of war veterans, including my father.

Miners of every generation deserve the same respect and support as war veterans, a point Whitehouse and Slevin emphasize:

"It is also important to honor the workers who mined the coal and operated and maintained the power plants that built the America we have today. For much of the past century, coal generated more than half of the electricity that powered our modern lives. We Americans have all enjoyed the economic wealth and power built by these women and men.

How to best honor them? First, we should honor the promises made to them about their pensions and health plans. Too many plans have been left underfunded or broke after companies abandoned their commitments. We should use revenue from the carbon price to make those pensions and health plans whole, and make workers eligible for these benefits whenever plants close.

What about something similar to a GI Bill college benefit for these workers and for their children? With a carbon price, we can afford it, and we could show our appreciation and respect in a tangible way. "

Not all fossil fuel workers are coal miners.

Last fall I smelled gas leaks in my 60 year old home. Five technicians from Washington Gas, young black men, came with their gas sniffers to find and fix the leaks.

I asked them how they got their jobs and if they liked them. They were all proud of and happy with this work. These fossil fuel workers will also need to be transitioned to new jobs they find fulfilling.

HB 1543 is a good start towards recognizing and achieving this. I urge you to give it a positive report.

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