

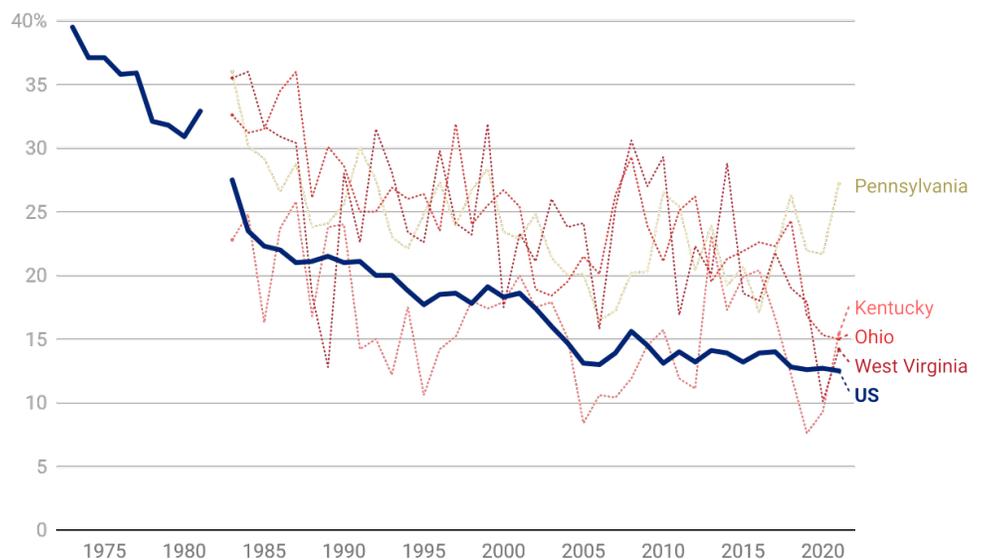


## Can the Infrastructure Law Create “Good-Paying, Union Jobs” Cleaning Up Coal Mines? Not Without Policy Action.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) earmarks \$16 billion for cleaning up legacy damage from the [coal](#) and [gas](#) industries, an investment that Deb Haaland, Secretary of the Department of the Interior, has promised will create “good-paying, union jobs” across Appalachia.

Ohio River Valley Institute research shows that BIL funding could create as many as 4,000 jobs reclaiming coal mine damage, primarily in Appalachian counties with disproportionately high [unemployment](#) and [poverty rates](#). But how will these jobs compare to the precarious, low-wage jobs that proliferate in the region? They may provide above-average wages, but they likely won’t be union and won’t pay enough to support a family.

**Figure 1: Union Membership (%), Private Construction**



Source: Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson, "Union Membership and Coverage Database from the Current Population Survey: Note," Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Vol. 56, No. 2, January 2003, pp. 349-54, [www.unionstats.com](http://www.unionstats.com) • Created with Datawrapper

The mine cleanup sector is non-unionized, and policies have historically created an uneven playing field for union contractors and workers. Many jobs in abandoned mine land (AML) cleanup will be created in the private construction sector, which has a low unionization rate in Appalachian states, especially in rural areas where abandoned mines are located.

**Figure 2: Annual Wages per Worker, Pike County, KY**



Source: 2019 and 2020 average annual wages per worker, QCEW, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Davis-Bacon wage levels from "Heavy" Davis-Bacon Act wage determination, DOL, May 2022."

Private construction wages in Pike County, Kentucky outpace average wages in the area, but they still are not enough to support basic necessities for a family of four, according to the EPI [Family Budget Calculator](#). Enforcing new prevailing wage levels on reclamation projects in Pike County would ensure much higher wage levels.

## **Here's How Appalachian States Can Create "Good-Paying, Union Jobs" Cleaning Up Mines.**

Our recommendations:

- Ensure AML contracts are subject to federal Davis-Bacon prevailing wage law, as mandated—for the first time—in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Monitor compliance, publicize violations, and train officials and inspectors on enforcement.
- Prioritize union workforces for large reclamation projects. Pursue large contracts where possible and bundle smaller ones. Establish a network to share data and best practices.
- Develop apprenticeship training programs as pipelines for reclamation work and on-ramps to the industry for locals with no construction experience. Establish relationships with local unions and contractors to coordinate apprenticeships.
- Ensure workers impacted by the downturn in the coal sector can access reclamation work.
- Prohibit irresponsible firms, such as coal companies with histories of violations, from bidding on reclamation projects.