**Headline:** Why an Army of Union Workers and Other Activists Coalesced Around America’s Infrastructure Bill

By Tom Conway

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**[Article Body:]**

Donneta Williams and her coworkers at the Corning plant in Wilmington, North Carolina, hail from different backgrounds and hold diverse views.

But just as they team up on the production floor to make top-quality products powering the internet, they banded together to push for a long-overdue infrastructure program that’s destined to lift up their community and countless others across America.

They didn’t fight alone. Williams and her colleagues were among a veritable army of Steelworkers and other activists from all over America whose unstinting advocacy helped to propel a historic infrastructure package through Congress and into the Oval Office.

Their rallies, letters, phone calls, tweets and visits to congressional offices provided the heft behind the bipartisan legislation that cleared the [House](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/05/us/politics/house-infrastructure-reconciliation.html) during the first week of November, just as their steely resolve helped to deliver the [Senate’s vote](https://www.npr.org/2021/08/10/1026081880/senate-passes-bipartisan-infrastructure-bill) in August.

“It unified us,” Williams, president of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 1025, said of the bill, which was signed into law by [President Joe Biden](https://www.cnbc.com/2021/11/15/biden-signing-1-trillion-bipartisan-infrastructure-bill-into-law.html) on November 15 and which will [invest billions](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/11/06/fact-sheet-the-bipartisan-infrastructure-deal/) in roads, bridges, seaports, locks and dams, manufacturing facilities, energy systems and communications networks.

“Everyone benefits,” she said, noting the infrastructure program will create and sustain millions of union manufacturing and construction jobs while modernizing the nation and revitalizing its manufacturing base. “It’s not about one particular party or one particular person. It’s about the nation as a whole and our future and what can be accomplished when everybody works together.”

Williams and her colleagues make [optical fiber](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_kA8EpCUQo), the backbone of broadband networks, a product as fine as thread that carries voice, data and video over the information superhighway at tremendous speed. Across the nation, however, the availability of high-speed broadband remains [grossly uneven](https://www.ntia.gov/press-release/2021/ntia-creates-first-interactive-map-help-public-see-digital-divide-across-country), and even some of Williams’ coworkers can’t access it for their own families.

That absurdity inflamed Local 1025’s support for an infrastructure program that will deliver [affordable, high-quality internet](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/infrastructure-bill-high-speed-internet-everyone/) to every American’s door while also bringing urgently needed repairs to [school buildings](https://www.starnewsonline.com/story/opinion/2021/09/29/nc-lawmakers-fail-act-public-school-buildings-fall-into-disrepair-general-assembly-budget/5847277001/), expanding the clean economy and [upgrading crumbling, congested roads](https://www.starnewsonline.com/story/news/2021/11/12/how-biden-infrastructure-bill-deal-help-north-carolina-roads-bridges-electric-cars-pipes/6359272001/) in Wilmington and other cities.

Williams and her coworkers sent their representatives and senators hundreds of postcards and emails championing the infrastructure legislation. And when the USW’s multi-city [“We Supply America” bus tour](https://www.americanmanufacturing.org/blog/the-united-steelworkers-embark-on-the-we-supply-america-bus-tour/) rolled into Wilmington in August to promote the bill, many of Williams’ coworkers donned blue-and-yellow T-shirts and [turned out for a rally](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJg0pmiEiYE) to show they were all in.

“They were the wind behind everything,” Williams said of the Local 1025 members, who clapped and cheered when it was her turn to speak.

Miners on Minnesota’s Iron Range also pulled out all the stops to press for the legislation, knowing it will support family-sustaining union jobs for generations to come by increasing demand for the materials and components needed to rebuild transportation networks, upgrade drinking water systems and tackle other improvement projects.

“This is something that we needed. We still have pipes in this country that are made of wood. That’s crazy,” said Cliff Tobey, the benefits and joint efforts coordinator for USW Locals 2660 and 1938, who wrote postcards, dropped in to congressional offices and even penned a column on the bill for the local newspaper.

But he didn’t stop there. Just a couple of days after the bill passed the House, Tobey was part of a USW delegation making one more visit to local congressional offices to ensure the package contained exactly what America’s workers expected.

“I think we understand what infrastructure means,” Tobey said, stressing the legislation’s importance for workers across a giant swath of industries. “It’s not just steel. It’s paper. It’s rubber. It’s glass. They’ll all gain from this.”

His own advocacy was driven partly by the 2007 collapse of the [Interstate 35W Bridge](https://www.npr.org/2017/08/01/540669701/10-years-after-bridge-collapse-america-is-still-crumbling) in Minneapolis, a tragedy that sent cars and trucks, commercial vehicles and a school bus plummeting more than 100 feet. The collapse killed 13 and injured dozens of other motorists during their evening commute.

Investigators eventually attributed the collapse to a design flaw. But the span, [which carried 144,000 vehicles a day](https://www.mprnews.org/story/2007/08/03/i-35w-bridge-fact-sheet), had been previously classified as “structurally deficient” and “fracture critical” because of maintenance issues.

There was no reason for that kind of neglect, Tobey said, noting how long America’s skilled workers have wanted to overhaul the nation’s crumbling infrastructure. Now, they’ll get that chance.

“It shows that when Steelworkers put their minds to something, they fight, and they keep fighting until they get it done,” Tobey observed.

The new infrastructure legislation will stimulate manufacturing and job growth all along supply chains.

That’s because construction projects require not just steel, aluminum, glass and other raw materials but paint, insulation, roofing products and electronic equipment, among many other items. Builders also need trucks to transport materials and heavy equipment for use at job sites.

“They’re going to be buying Bobcats,” said William Wilkinson, president of USW Local 560 in Gwinner, North Dakota, noting the Steelworkers fought to include domestic procurement requirements in the infrastructure bill, ensuring the nation rebuilds with highly skilled union workers.

Wilkinson represents hundreds of workers who make excavators, skid loaders, utility vehicles and various attachments. And when the infrastructure program increases demand for those products, many other businesses, like Bobcat’s suppliers and local stores, will also benefit.

“Everyone supported it,” Wilkinson said of the infrastructure bill.

After the many months they spent advocating for the legislation, USW members want nothing more than to get to work rebuilding America.

“It’s dear to our hearts,” Williams said of the historic opportunity she and her members helped to create. “It makes you feel good knowing you did your part.”