

# INTERNATIONAL UNION OF OPERATING ENGINEERS

LOCAL NO. 49, 49A, 49B, 49C, 49D, 49E, 49L  
MINNESOTA • NORTH DAKOTA • SOUTH DAKOTA

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Congressman Paul Gosar  
Committee on Natural Resources  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations  
Chairman

Dear Chairman Gosar,

I submit the following written testimony in advance of my appearance at the House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing titled, “Dependence on Foreign Adversaries: America’s Critical Minerals Crisis.”

My name is Jason George, and I am the elected leader of Minnesota’s largest construction union, the International Union of Operating Engineers, Local 49. Our members operate and repair the heavy equipment that builds every aspect of our region. Thank you for the invitation to be here today to discuss a very serious issue facing our nation and the members I represent. The mining of critical minerals — specifically, where they are mined — will have a profound impact on our collective future.

I was born, raised and currently live in Minnesota. The vast majority of our nearly 15,000 members live and work there. Our state has a long and proud history of mining. We like to remind people that our state mined the ore that produced the steel that won two world wars. The mining industry has been and remains the lifeblood of northern Minnesota.

Today, we are at the precipice of a generational opportunity that could launch another 100 years of prosperity through mining. Our nation, and the world, are in desperate need of critical minerals such as nickel, cobalt, and copper. These minerals are necessary to build the batteries, wind turbines, solar panels, and other products the world needs in order to transition to clean energy.

95% of our domestic nickel resources, a vast majority of our cobalt, and about a third of our copper deposits are beneath the ground in northern Minnesota. The only question before us is whether or not we will be allowed to mine them. There is no other question.

We have the technological knowhow to extract these minerals safely. The people who live near potential mines want the opportunity. We have the skilled union workforce to build the projects, and a productive, hard-working population ready to operate the mines once they are built.

What we don't have is a fair process for permitting mines that is based on science and reason. Instead, we have a hyper-political process that has been hijacked by a combination of wealthy cabin owners, wealthy tourists, business owners who supply their outfitting needs, and anti-development extremists. This small group of people is highly influential within the Democratic Party structure. They are loud. They give a lot of money. And too many Democrats, including in my home state, are advancing their own narrow political agenda at the expense of Minnesota and the American people.

The latest example is a decision by the Department of the Interior to ban mining on more than 225,000 acres of northern Minnesota land that contain the vast majority of our mineral resources. The department did so without studying any plan for a specific project. In fact, it refused to study a mine plan submitted in this area. Instead, it issued a blanket ban based on hypothetical scenarios. This decision had nothing to do with science and everything to do with Democratic politics.

Too much is at stake to allow this to happen. Good-paying union jobs are on the line. Members of my union and the others that will build these projects earn family-sustaining wages, world-class health care, and pensions that ensure the dignity of a good life in retirement. Unlike the data used to ban mining, these jobs aren't hypotheticals. Like any good union representative, we have a signed contract. All of the companies that have or will soon produce mine plans in this area have signed project labor agreements with the local trade unions ensuring we will build their mines.

Our members aren't the only workers with a lot at stake. Mining plant operation jobs are among the highest paid in the region. The number of jobs generated by businesses that will pop up to support the mines is limitless and will pay well. As I said, the opportunity for workers is generational.

As a labor leader, I would be remiss if I didn't point out what is happening now and will continue to happen to workers if we don't mine these minerals in America. Many news sources have documented the working conditions in mines around the globe where these minerals are currently produced. A recent program on NPR titled, "How 'Modern-Day Slavery' in the Congo Powers the Rechargeable Battery Economy," is worth listening to.

It details the conditions people face mining cobalt in the Congo. This mineral is toxic to touch and breathe in raw form if not mined properly. Right now, hundreds of thousands of Congolese people, including many women and children, are mining it with their bare hands, being poisoned every day.

Siddharth Kara, a fellow at Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health who has researched modern-day slavery for two decades, said this on the program:

"We shouldn't be transitioning to the use of electric vehicles at the cost of the people and environment of one of the most downtrodden and impoverished corners of the world. The bottom of the supply chain, where almost all of the world's cobalt is coming from, is a horror show."

The Biden administration has agreed these conditions are abhorrent and must not be supported. Just last year the Department of Labor said it would add lithium-ion batteries to a list of goods made with materials known to be produced with child or forced labor under a 2006 human trafficking law. It was widely reported that this decision was based on the batteries containing cobalt, a mineral largely mined in the Congo.

I simply cannot understand how our government can rightly acknowledge the human atrocities in countries like the Congo that mine our minerals, while the same administration moves to ban the mining of these minerals in America, where we can ensure such atrocities do not happen.

This is a shameful position. It is rife with hypocrisy, and it is an embarrassing example of partisan politics at its worst.

You can't say you are for human rights and then be OK with the metals in your Tesla batteries being mined in the Congo by women and children poisoning themselves because you don't want these mines in your backyard, where they might obstruct your view.

You can't say you are serious about a clean-energy future, knowing that recycling won't produce an adequate supply of minerals to get the job done, and yet oppose domestic mining to meet our needs.

You can't say you are serious about protecting our national security when you are banning mining in America while China buys up mineral mines in the rest of the world.

Enough is enough. We as a nation must stand up to this small but vocal class of elite obstructionists. Mining technology has advanced. We can do this safely here. We have the best-trained union construction workers in the world ready to build our mines. We have workers hungry for family-sustaining jobs in operations right here at home. We have businesses chomping at the bit to support a domestic mining industry.

I will repeat what I said a few minutes ago. The only question is whether or not the United States government will allow us to mine.

A lot is at stake. Opportunities for workers. The lives of poor people in foreign lands. Our energy future. Our national security. We must find the will to do the right thing.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for your time today, and for drawing attention to this critical issue.

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Local 49