

Wanted: A Workforce for the Future

By Contra Costa County Supervisor Federal D. Glover

AS WE CELEBRATE Labor Day this weekend, the American workforce is undergoing a transformation in the first decade of the 21st century. Union membership is down and unemployment is still high, especially in the Bay Area.

Yet, new jobs in industries go begging for lack of people to fill them. A common complaint among employers is that California is not producing a workforce with the skills needed to compete in the modern world.

Today, a high-school education is not enough. Yet not everybody can go to college, nor is a college education necessary in order to obtain a well-paying job. Today's jobs need workers with the specialized knowledge and aptitudes in order to perform in a safe, productive and efficient manner

Much has been written about the need for the state's higher education system to graduate qualified workers and researchers for the high-tech and bio-tech industries.

The same problem exists in the so-called blue-collar sector where more and more, workers must be versed in the rapidly changing skills and technological knowledge needed in local industries such as the refineries, energy producers and chemical plants in Contra Costa, Solano and Alameda counties.

These companies that have long been a key component in our regional economy are facing a crisis – they can't find new workers to fill the jobs that retiring workers are leaving. If we don't address their needs, these mainstays of our economy will be forced to relocate. One human resources person of a local refinery said he had to interview 600 applicants in order to fill 20 qualified people to interview. Another lamented that in order to fill one highly-paid position, he was forced to hire an out-of-state engineer rather than someone who was already here because the local resident simply did not have the necessary skills for the job. And some of the out-of-area hires soon find the cost of living in the Bay Area too expensive for them and they leave after a short period.

Most of these positions are far from the grimy, hot and backbreaking work environments of the past. Most of these workers in the refineries and manufacturing operations are sitting in front of a computer console, standing in a "Clean Room" or working on finely tuned machinery.

That is why I am proposing (later this month) that industry, the unions, the county and the Contra Costa Community Colleges develop an institute that will help train and develop the workers needed in this new age. The institute will have two parts: a short phase that will help train workers needed for a narrow band of jobs at the refineries; and a longer program that will give potential workers the broad base of knowledge and skills to move into any number of positions at our local industries and plants. The college district in

partnership with local industry and the unions will oversee the institute. The institute could be expanded to fill the needs of other occupations such as in medicine or environmental cleanup.

I have a special affinity for the working man and woman. I come from a union family. My mother worked in the local canneries, and my father was a steelworker. I know the hard work and working conditions they had to endure in order to send me to college. I worked at Dow Chemical for two decades and I know the economic and societal role local industry plays in our communities.

But the days when our high school graduates could depend on moving into a lifetime job at the local mill or steel plant are quickly disappearing. The secure jobs in industries that would often hire several generations from the same family are gone. This Labor Day, let's ensure that our sons and daughters who want to pursue the local jobs at our plants, mills and refineries, have the skills and knowledge to fill those positions. Let's make sure our refiners and manufacturers don't need to look elsewhere for their workers. Or worst yet, be forced to relocate because of a lack of qualified workers.

Glover is the supervisor for District 5.