

A Good Life For Our Workers

By Federal D. Glover

I grew up the son of a steelworker so I know the value of hard hats and hard work. Our modest home in downtown Pittsburg was less than a mile from the steel plant so he didn't have the long commutes most of us have today. Sometimes he would come home tired from a hard days work, but he always had time to talk to me about what I did at school or to reprimand me for not minding Mom.

He didn't make a fortune but we had a roof over our heads, an old Buick station wagon, food on the table and he made enough to send his kid to college. It was a good life.

I have an affinity for those workers. I ended up working at Dow for 20 years.

The times are long gone when it seemed that after high school, a sure job was waiting in one of our local industries.

Local industries are facing a worker shortage because of two concurrent trends.

In our pursuit of a better education for every eligible student and our society's movement into a service economy, somewhere along the line, hard work -- blue-collar work -- lost its status and was devalued among America's young people.

In today's schools, students are being told that obtaining a 4-year university degree is the only route to true success, when, in fact, a 2-year associate degree or certificate program from a local community college can also provide a path to high wage, fulfilling employment.

The other trend is: As the Baby Boom generation reaches retirement age, our industries find themselves in dire need of skilled workers.

"Many of our craftworkers are within a few years of retirement," said Rulon McKay, Shell's HR manager. "In fact, some craft groups have an average age in the low to mid 50s. So we became concerned recently when our hiring efforts resulted in fewer than the number of qualified craftworkers we were looking for."

"USS-POSCO Industries and other local manufacturers, chemical companies, refineries, and power companies require skilled instrument/electrical/electronic technicians to maintain and trouble shoot our modern equipment," echoed George E. Kunst, Jr, general manager of employee relations for USS-POSCO.

Two years ago, local refineries found themselves with a shortage of qualified process technicians. They brought their need to my attention as well as the county's Workforce Development Board and Los Medanos College President Peter Garcia.

The partnership of industry, labor, LMC and the Workforce Development Board was able to develop a highly successful program for process technicians at LMC which currently has about 90 students in its program.

The process tech program is being used as the model to fulfill other workforce needs.

At the behest of local manufacturers, for the past year, industry and LMC staff have been updating the Electrical/Electronic Technology program, to make it more relevant to the 21st Century workplace.

“The EETEC program at Los Medanos College is viewed as another in a series of opportunities to build a talent pipeline for critically needed skills in our industry,” says McKay.

The EETEC program is at a critical juncture. While some industries have stepped up to the plate by giving money to modernize curriculum the program is at a point where physical facilities have to be built. The program needs a modern lab so students can get valuable hands-on experience.

Grants can cover equipment, staffing and marketing but those funds cannot be used for construction. The program needs \$370,000 to begin construction of the lab (a modular) on the LMC campus in January 2008. “We are currently still short of \$90,000 to begin construction,” says Kiran Kamath, LMC’s dean of occupational education.

“This program will not get off the ground unless industry, in partnership with LMC, makes it happen through direct financial support,” says Kunst.

Besides the obvious benefits for local industry, well-paid workers benefit our community life as well. With industry’s help, the good life doesn’t have to be a dream.

Glover is the Contra Costa County Supervisor for District V, which includes the communities of Antioch, Bay Point, Bethel Island, Oakley and Pittsburg.