

- **With Economy Chilling The Trades, Union Apprenticeship Programs On Ice**



(POSTED: 1/25/10) For Tene Smith, a single mother of four, landing a union apprenticeship would mean earning an income that could support her family. It would mean working with her hands, a job that she loves. And, as a woman, it would mean receiving the same rate of pay as the men.

But the 39-year-old, who lives at her mom's in Calumet Heights, can't reach her goal just yet.

Nearly all apprenticeship programs across the 24 crafts affiliated with the Chicago and Cook County Building and Construction Trades Council are closed to newcomers, and it's likely to remain that way for about another year, according to Tom Villanova, president of the council.

The schools are still serving second- through fifth-year students, Villanova said, but they've cut off entry into first-year apprenticeships since most of the locals are facing around a 30 percent unemployment rate.

"You have to put your 30 percent to work first before you can take new members in," Villanova said.

Since apprentices are cheaper labor than veteran employees, "contractors would jump on those guys first," as one unemployed rank-and-file electrician put it.

Even so, there's not enough work available for apprentices to complete the union's requirement of hands-on training, Villanova said.

During an apprenticeship, workers learn the skills of a particular trade through the

Communications Workers of America Local 4250
3055 Glenwood-Dyer Road, Lynwood, Illinois 60411
Elizabeth R. VanDerWoude, President (708) 757-4065 (Office)
evp4250@sbcglobal.net (E-Mail)
<http://www.cwalocal4250.org> (Website)

combination of classroom time and paid, on-the-job training. After finishing the program, which can take three to five years, the union members become certified journeymen.

Without the working component, there's hardly any reason for training centers to run a class, school officials explained.

"The programs really don't have a choice," said Helena Worthen, a clinical associate professor of labor education at the University of Illinois. "They hate to do it. The training is their pipeline. . . . That's where the young blood comes from. That's where the next generation comes from. That's where the high skills come from that demand the market."

The majority of members in the building trades are in their 50s and nearing retirement. Within a couple of years -- unless they get more young members -- the unions could see half as many people working and half as many people paying into the pension funds.

What's more, as the size and power of a union diminishes, workers could also see wages, benefits and standards shrink.

"Holding on to the market share, meaning controlling the work, is where the unions' power comes from," Worthen said. "If the unions' bargaining power goes down because they don't have enough market share, then the prevailing wage can go down."

In spite of the downsizing, there is certainly no shortage of people who want to join construction unions.

Many locals have continued their normal application procedures, creating a backlog of workers ready for when the market picks up.

Pipefitters Local 597, for instance, held its annual entry exam on Jan. 16 at its training center in Mokena with a turnout of about 750 people, though the union hasn't been able to take a new class for nearly two years.

"They told us that with so many people, it's hard to say where you're going to place," said Smith, who (pictured above) is hoping the welding class she is taking will give her an edge. "I just went in there with an open mind. I don't want to put pressure on me."

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Plumbers Local 130 also did not run a class last year, and the school's waiting list holds anywhere from 1,500 to 2,000 names.

"There's plenty of people that want to be plumbers," said Rich O'Connor, training coordinator of the Plumbers Joint Apprenticeship Council Local 130 UA.

After open registration in April 2008 for Iron Workers Local 1, 905 people made the eligibility list out of 2,068 applicants. Only 27 were accepted into the program that fall. Since then, there has not been a new class.

"I literally have 850 on hold," said Al Bass, apprenticeship coordinator. "And they call me once a week and ask me if anything picked up yet."

The training center for Operating Engineers Local 150 has not been able to take new students for a year and a half. Three years ago, the school enrolled 120 first-year apprentices, which was the yearly average. But the number fell to 26 in 2008 and has been stagnant ever since.

For Painters District Council 14, its school used to start a class once a month, but last year it dropped to two. The class sizes are also smaller, with five to 10 students as opposed to 15 to 20.

****"If you hire a new apprentice, you have to take one off the unemployment list as well," said Ed Bogdan, director of training for the Chicago Area Painting and Decorating Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee.****

Similar enrollment freezes are occurring at union training centers across Michigan, Ohio, Indiana and Missouri, out of a 10-state region in the Midwest, according to an official with the U.S. Labor Department's Office of Apprenticeship, which oversees all apprenticeship programs.

Even though the numbers are down for first-year programs, some Chicago-area training centers are busier than ever.

The facilities also offer upgrade courses for journeymen to hone their skills, and with staggering unemployment levels, the out-of-work members have jumped back in the classroom.

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"The journeymen now have time and incentive to come back," said Bass, who has witnessed a 100 percent increase with the veteran iron workers.

Painters District Council 14 has also doubled its number of enrolled journeymen, and it has tripled for the training center of [Roofers Local 11](#).

The Chicagoland Laborers Joint Apprentice and Training Fund boasted 500 more trainees in 2009 compared to 2008.

The Operating Engineers added two extra months to its training session to accommodate an increase of 150 to 200 percent over the last three years.

The majority of journeymen throughout the trades are enrolled in safety classes, as contractors are requiring more certification, and skills classes relating to potential new jobs, such as road construction.

"Everybody is trying to find the way back to work," a member of Operating Engineers Local 150 said.

By Katie Drews, for ChicagoUnionNews.com

Contact: info@chicagounionnews.com