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## Facing the coming labor shortage

*Unions say they want to train younger workers, but often-times feel ignored*

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Oregon's business community is sounding an alarm about a looming shortage in skilled labor, but it's not clear to what extent government efforts in "workforce development" will be able to solve the problem. Oregon unions, for their part, have been eager and willing to partner in efforts to improve worker skills, but feel like they too often get left out of plans for workforce training.

Demographics is the number one reason a labor shortage is expected — the baby boom generation becomes eligible to retire in the next five to 15 years. That will likely mean greater competition for skilled workers by employers throughout the economy — construction, high tech, health care, the public sector, even manufacturing.

That last, the notion of a labor shortage in manufacturing, seems to go against conventional wisdom: Hasn't manufacturing taken a beating in Oregon and the rest of the country, losing jobs to foreign competition and corporate outsourcing?

The short answer is, "Yes."

According to the Oregon Employment Department, statewide manufacturing employment peaked in 1998 at 227,000, declined in the 2000-2003 recession, and has been flat since then.

State economists think it will account for 205,500 jobs in 2014, about the same number as the end of 2006. But such numbers hide the reality of turnover and changing skills requirements. Even in an industry with a declining workforce, workers retire or change jobs and need to be replaced. And computerization and mechanization, which contribute to job loss, at the

same time require that remaining workers have higher-level skills.

"New technologies are really changing the workplace," said Lita Colligan, workforce policy adviser to Governor Ted Kulongoski, "and with baby boomers retiring in the next few years, we don't have a pipeline of skilled workers to take those jobs."

That's the message State Rep. Brad Witt has been hearing, loudly. Witt, who served 14 years as secretary-treasurer of the Oregon AFL-CIO, became chair of the House Workforce and Economic Development Committee at the beginning of the year. His committee held several weeks of hearings in January to listen to business and labor about what the Legislature could do to increase family-wage jobs in Oregon.

"Not one witness didn't say we're headed for a train wreck in 10 or 15 years," Witt said.

The culprits most often fingered are culture and school: A shift in culture has made young people less interested in technical occupations, and the K-12 school system isn't steering students toward skilled trades careers.

Some labor leaders expect to see the business community clamor for more tax dollars to pay for their workforce training needs. That's the chorus Bob Shiprack, executive secretary of the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council, says he's heard from business leaders.

"The people that complain the most about not being able to find skilled people are the ones who don't pay them what they're worth," Shiprack said. "What drives me crazy is that they're doing nothing about this supposed labor shortage except asking the taxpayer to give them subsidies to train their workers."

Meanwhile, union training programs, which operate without tax dollars, struggle for recognition. Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain says the state workforce training sys-



Attorney Jim Egan of Albany leads a workshop on Oregon's workers' compensation insurance system.

## ANNUAL OREGON LABOR LAW CONFERENCE BLOSSOMS INTO A CROWD OF NEARLY 250

What started 11 years ago as an intimate gathering of about 30 union leaders eager to learn more about state and federal labor laws has blossomed into a conference of nearly 250 union leaders, business agents, shop stewards and organizers who have overflowed the venue.

"We may be looking at moving to the convention center next year," said Norman Malbin, in-house attorney for Electrical Workers Local 48 and founder of the Oregon Labor Law Conference.

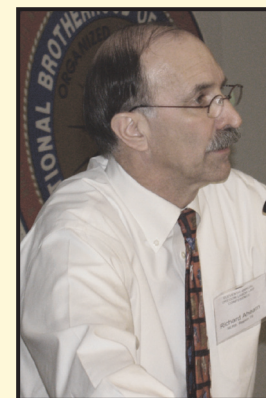
The day-long conference was held Jan. 19 at Local 48's union hall and training center in North-east Portland.

This year's confab featured a plenary session on "Employment and Labor Law Overview" presented by management attorney Rick Liebman.

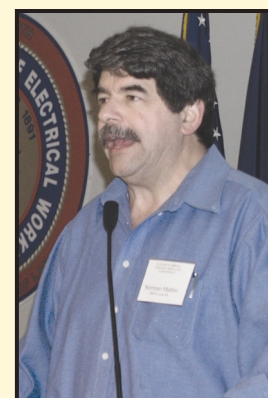
Twenty workshops are offered — ranging from "corporate campaigns" to "union discipline" to a panel on the impacts of last year's Kentucky River decision by the National Labor Relations Board that redefined the definition of a supervisor. The

panel for that discussion featured Richard Ahearn, regional director of the NLRB for Region 19, and attorneys from both labor and management.

Malbin said the goal is to keep registration affordable while offering useful information that union staffers can utilize at work.



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