

Down economy pumps up apprenticeships

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People are lining up for construction apprenticeships, but contractors cannot hire them until there's more work.

"Unfortunately, a lot of that is out of our control," said Jerry Knapp, business development representative for the Wisconsin Laborers-Employers Cooperation and Education Trust. "If development doesn't occur, contractors don't work. And if contractors don't work, our members don't."

In Milwaukee, 102 people showed up Tuesday to take Milwaukee Laborer's Local 113's apprenticeship test. About 600 people took the Local 113 test last month.

Roughly 150 people, a record-setting turnout, showed up for the last laborers union apprenticeship test in Madison, said Tom Fisher, president/business manager of the Wisconsin Laborers District Council, DeForest. "I think it's just an indication right now with our jobs being outsourced, such as Chrysler and (General Motors Corp.) shutting down in Janesville," he said. "I think that has a lot to do with people looking at the construction industry because these are jobs that can't be outsourced."

The Associated Builders & Contractors of Wisconsin Inc., Madison, also is reporting an increase in applicants who want to start apprenticeships before getting a contractor to sponsor them, said Wayne Belanger, ABC director of education. He said the association is still inviting people to sign up and giving them the message to be ready to jump into a job if things pick up for contractors. "It does give us a nice base for the future," Belanger said, "and there is a future."

The laborers union cannot let applicants start new apprenticeships until 90 percent of the members who already started their apprenticeship training are back to work, Fisher said. He said about 60 percent of the laborers apprentices are working right now. There are more than 400 people who have passed the laborers apprenticeship test and are waiting to begin their training, he said. In Wisconsin's metropolitan areas, such as Milwaukee, Fisher said, about 20 percent of laborers union members are on the bench, and about 50 percent are on the sidelines in the Fox Valley and northern Wisconsin. "We're hoping the stimulus money really jump-starts us," he said. "But you've got to remember that vertical construction is down also."

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act money going into Wisconsin Department of Transportation projects will offer a lot of work to laborers, but electrical workers need the vertical construction to pick up, said Mike Chetney, training director for the Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee for the electrical industry. There are about as many applications this year as last year, he said. But, Chetney said, he wants to start a class of about 20 apprentices this year, which is about half the size of a typical class.

Knapp said the laborers are not predicting the number of new jobs they can create through the stimulus projects, but optimism is increasing. Meanwhile, he said, the union is telling applicants that, "You may not have a job tomorrow, but keep at it."