

Plenty of trained welders for Ocean State marine trades

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A March 27 editorial here entitled "Comparative advantage" discussed the purported skills-gap challenges in shipbuilding and other marine trades in Rhode Island. It said that one prominent local company "currently employs 80 contract workers from elsewhere in the U.S. and 10 from China via an employment agency. And [that company] also hires several graduates of a federally funded on-the-job training program managed by the state Department of Labor and Training." The editorial then asked: "Wouldn't it be nice if there were more highly trained welders in the Ocean State?"

So it is said that there is an important industry in the state but that supposedly there aren't enough qualified welders to fill the positions so these companies must hire out-of-state (and out-of-country) welders to fill these positions. And we are also spending our state and federal tax dollars to now train welders so they could work in this industry in the future. The taxpayers are underwriting the costs of training for these private-sector companies.

But there are *already* an ample number of highly trained and qualified local welders to do these jobs in the marine trades or any other industry in the state. The private sector trained all of these craftsmen and women (no taxpayer assistance needed, thank you), they live in the area, and they can go to work today. Moreover, if additional welders are needed there are ways to recruit and train them already in place.

Where are these existing skilled workers you may ask? They are within the Rhode Island Building & Construction Trades Council; and any *new* recruits needed could be taken care of through the nationally recognized Building Futures pre-apprenticeship program in Providence.

Plumbers and Fitters Local 51 and Iron Workers Local 37 have accredited training programs. They are within a mile of each other in East Providence, and between them have 32 "state-of-the-art" welding booths, with room for expansion if needed. These facilities have the most modern welding equipment and updated, expensive government-compliant ventilation systems. They train welders to meet all necessary piping specifications and structural codes.

Long ago, contractors with union contracts realized that to compete in the marketplace they would have to use the most modern tools and technologies. So in conjunction with their signatory unions, they have developed funds exclusively dedicated to training.

These training programs are overseen by joint labor/management committees that carefully scrutinize the investment, the program and the applicants so that ultimately the signatory contractors receive the highly qualified people that the marketplace demands.

Money for these programs comes from collectively bargained contracts between labor and management; they are completely self-supporting.

Over the years some of the money invested by both local businesses and government for their expansions and modernizations has indirectly trickled into these programs. This is the perfect circle of investment, production, safety applications and training that has worked for a long time here and elsewhere.

While these unions have trained workers available, our anemic economy has limited their work opportunities in the construction industry. Regardless, they still have highly specialized welding skills.

There is no need to import foreign workers using the H-2B visa program in a state, such as Rhode Island, with high unemployment rates. This should outrage the state Department of Labor and Training and every local, state, and

federal elected public official — particularly when there are enough local unemployed welders qualified to do these jobs. Adding insult to injury is that the taxpayers, including unemployed welders (as well as the rest of us), are underwriting the cost of the government programs that train the welders for these employers.

A marine-industry company representative recently said that "if we could find Rhode Islanders who are trained welders, we'd hire them," and that all anyone has to do is pick up the phone and call. This is not true. Just so the readers know, we have made several calls. We also have had many intermediaries intervene on our behalf, but to this day we have not even gotten the courtesy of a response.

In this economic environment we should not be going out of state for new welders or underwriting the cost of training them, particularly when there are so many ready and able Rhode Islanders who can fill these job openings tomorrow.

So you asked, "Wouldn't it be nice if there were more highly trained welders available in the Ocean State?" There are, and they are at Plumbers and Fitters Local 51, 11 Hemingway Drive, East Providence, and Iron workers Local 37, 845 Waterman Ave., East Providence. Moreover, there are many others who want to be welders. They are at Building Futures, 133 Delaine St., Providence.

What is the construction industry's loss could be the marine trade industry's (and taxpayers') gain. We just need someone to return just one of our many phone calls.

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