

How Does Labor Involvement in Skill Formation Programs Build the Strength of Union Organizations?



Introduction

Spurred by the growth in jobs that require some post-secondary education and training, and the imminent retirement of 51 million Baby Boom workers, the practices of apprenticeship, job-driven skill training, and lifelong learning have attracted intensive public policy attention since the end of the Great Recession.

Unions have a long history of advocacy for greater education and training for workers and their families. That support stretches back to the founding of joint apprenticeship programs in the building and construction trades and the establishment of skill training partnerships with employers in aerospace, industrial manufacturing, public service, health care, telecommunications, and hospitality industries, among others.

The AFL-CIO encourages unions to use collective bargaining, alliances with community organizations, representation in government-sponsored training systems, and participation in civil society (e.g. foundation) initiatives to continue and expand labor engagement in skill formation and workforce development. Unions provide the workers' voice that enables skill training to be responsive to the needs and career aspirations of workers. Active labor engagement in skill formation in the workplace builds the strength of unions as robust, innovative organizations.

Skill Formation Programs Help to Save Jobs and Grow Union Membership

The investment by unionized employers in workforce development and skill formation programs contributes to the retention of current jobs at the worksite and growth in employment. As union jobs are maintained, and work expands inside unionized companies, union membership grows and the labor movement broadens its reach.

Skill Formation Programs Help Workers and Union Employers Compete

Unfair trade policies create challenges for workers and union employers to compete and retain work. One response of organized labor is to develop high performance workplaces and implement better approaches to enhance production and deliver services. The Machinists union, for example, has found that a high performance work organization includes the "integration of continuous learning and skill building ... thereby meeting the changing skill and education needs of the members." Organized labor brings focus and commitment to industry modernization that links economic growth and job creation to entire supply chains of products and services.

Building Coalitions with Community and Faith Based Organizations

Organized labor recognizes the value of building coalitions with community and faith based organizations. What is one of the most powerful messages labor can deliver? That unions play a leading role in creating family-supporting jobs and providing access to those jobs for community members. Delivering that message offers the opportunity to strengthen community-labor coalitions to fight for pro-worker public policies and support organizing campaigns. Organized labor enhances its standing in the community as the bridge to family-sustaining jobs for union members and community residents alike.