

Hire unemployed to renovate manufacturing

By R. Thomas Buffenbarger

At the recent White House forum on job creation, President Obama heard ideas from businessmen, labor leaders and economists on how to reverse America's record high unemployment. From my perspective, only a strong, stable manufacturing sector can rebuild our economy and create new jobs.

With that goal in mind, here's an innovative idea Obama should consider: Hire the unemployed to renovate and reinvigorate America's industrial infrastructure.

Among the 31 million Americans idled to some degree in this recession, the talent pool is deep and deeply experienced. Almost 3.4 million were laid off from production, installation and construction jobs. Their skills could be put to work rehabilitating our aging factories and installing new machinery — the physical infrastructure needed for 21st-century manufacturing.

Another 5.3 million jobless Americans are college-educated, highly skilled and heavy on expertise. More than 2.6 million come from management and professional ranks. Another 2.7 million once worked in the service sector. If you drill down into the Bureau of Labor Statistics' numbers, their expertise becomes obvious.

More than 600,000 were self-employed; 646,000 worked in the financial sector; 261,000 left the information sector; and a whopping 1.4 million hailed from the professional and business services category. Their talents can create the strategic business, financing and marketing plans for revving up our factories — the intellectual underpinnings of long-term success.

My point is this: America needs both brawn and brains to rebuild our manufacturing capacity, end this recession and ignite a new era of prosperity.

To help achieve this, we need a modern version of Franklin Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration. This unique program put 3.5 million men to work in a single year — the equivalent of finding jobs for 8 million Americans today. The WPA focused on local community projects with a lasting value to the nation. It spent 85 percent of its funds on payroll and 15 percent on materials. Some projects demanded brawn. Others relied on brain power. But all were rooted in local initiative and accountability.

Fast-forward 75 years. A new WPA can be rolled out quickly. Americans can be put to work renovating factories, installing state-of-the-art equipment and updating plans for small to medium-sized businesses. Local communities can use federal dollars to hire the unemployed. Local businesses can get a second chance to go global.

But let's not stop there. Public funds are being spent to help private enterprises. A new social contract can be written — one that aligns corporate responsibility with community values, one that requires recipients to meet environmental and labor standards, one that requires a long-term commitment to making it in America. To sweeten the deal, investment tax credits can help underwrite renovation costs and purchases of new equipment or processes.

As Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke observed in 2007, this country "needs machines and new factories and new buildings and so forth in order for us to have a strong and growing economy." To me, the "so forth" is that we-can-make-it spirit. And right now, that spirit could use a huge shot of adrenaline.

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