

Skilled Trades Seek Workers

Contractors, Unions Try Web, Schools;
A 'Dirty Jobs' Role

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By ANTON TROIANOVSKI

Even as the economy slumps and unemployment rises, strong demand for power plants, oil refineries and export goods has many manufacturers and construction contractors scrambling to find enough skilled workers to plug current and future holes.

With the shortage of welders, pipe fitters and other high-demand workers likely to get worse as more of them reach retirement age, unions, construction contractors and other businesses are trying to figure out how to attract more young people to those fields.



Associated Press

By 2012, demand in fields like welding is expected to exceed supply.

force ages.

Their challenge: overcoming the perception that blue-collar trades offer less status, money and chance for advancement than white-collar jobs, and that college is the best investment for everyone.

To highlight the benefits of a career in the skilled trades -- and, sometimes, the potential pitfalls of automatically opting for college -- unions and employers are turning to schools, the military, MySpace and even a 46-year-old former opera singer named Mike Rowe.

Mr. Rowe is the host of the Discovery Channel series "Dirty Jobs," which chronicles him tackling tasks ranging from alpaca shearing to steelworking. Mr. Rowe is in talks with [Terex Corp.](#), a Westport, Conn., maker of construction equipment, which has a two-year backlog of crane orders, thanks to strong overseas sales. Terex, which hired Mr. Rowe to appear at a trade show earlier this year, is hoping he can help it recruit young workers as the company's current work

"Attracting the best and brightest into the industry is a challenge; it's not happening," says Mike Bazinet, a spokesman for the company.

Mr. Rowe confirmed he is talking to Terex, but doesn't know what his specific role would be. It would likely involve extolling the virtues of manual labor, as he has done on his show since its

debut three years ago. "We've made work the enemy," Mr. Rowe says. "Essentially we took the nobility and the necessity out of it and replaced it with this vague sense of drudgery."

Mr. Rowe has also spoken to employees of [W.W. Grainger](#) Inc., an industrial-supplies distributor. Jim Ryan, the chief executive of Grainger, says his company has no immediate plans to team up with Mr. Rowe but that it has spent about \$400,000 over the past two years to fund technical-education programs around the country.

"In the last several years ... all of the benefits of a career in the trades have kind of gotten lost in the clutter of all the other career opportunities," Mr. Ryan said. "What the industry needs is to be much more aggressive in marketing and creating visibility."

Companies and unions don't dispute that college can be a wise investment, but they also say some unionized craft workers can earn more than the average college graduate, without the burden of student debt.

"You earn while you learn," says Brian Couch, a young electrician, in a video posted on the Web sites YouTube and MySpace. "It's not like going to college where you go to school for five to eight years and have to work a part-time job."



Mike Rowe

That video and several others like it were developed by public-relations firm Pac/West Communications for Local 48 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the National Electrical Contractors Association in Portland, Ore.

The two groups have teamed up for the online campaign to encourage high-school graduates to consider an apprenticeship as an alternative to college. MySpace is owned by News Corp., which also owns [Dow Jones](#) & Co., publisher of The Wall Street Journal.

In many parts of the economy, there are too many workers, rather than too few. Since January, the U.S. has lost 463,000 jobs. Residential construction and manufacturers that rely primarily on the U.S. market have been hit especially hard.

But the energy industry is hard up for workers who, among other things, can make precision welds, fit pipes for pipelines and oil refineries, and understand the complex electrical wiring in modern power plants. Though the weak housing market has idled many workers who did similar jobs for home builders, their skills often aren't sharp enough to make the cut.

Dusty Henry, a 25-year-old electrician in Portland, Ore., who belongs to IBEW Local 48, says he earns \$34 an hour working on renewable-energy projects while some of his friends who went to college are having a hard time finding jobs.

"I chose the path that I wanted to take...and learned as much as I could for that one thing," Mr. Henry said. "You go to college to kind of figure out what you want to do, but if you don't figure it out, you go out with debt and you still don't know."

In Indiana, where [BP PLC](#) is spending \$3.8 billion to expand its Whiting refinery, demand for carpenters, electricians, pipe fitters and several other trades is expected to outstrip supply by 16% or more in the current quarter, according to construction-industry consulting and investment banking firm FMI Corp.

Such shortfalls are forcing some employers to delay projects and others to pay their workers higher wages or offer more overtime. Rich Mycka, a Highland, Ind., contractor whose specialty is managing heavy industrial jobs like upgrading factories and relining blast furnaces, says he can't find enough qualified project managers, construction managers and schedulers. And he expects the labor shortage to get worse as workers retire: Mr. Mycka says the average age of his 30 employees is close to 50.

Kevin Chavez, an Albuquerque, N.M., cement contractor who employs about 100 workers, says he has raised the wages for his skilled workers by 7% to 10% a year over the past 18 to 24 months. His unskilled workers haven't gotten a raise.

Skilled-labor shortages are likely to intensify in coming years as more workers retire and the economy picks up again. By 2012, FMI predicts, nationwide demand for electricians, masons and pipe fitters, if their numbers remain constant, will exceed supply by at least 5%. Regional and seasonal shortages are expected to be much steeper.

Between 1995 and 2005, the percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds in college rose to 39% to 35%. Manufacturers, contractors and unions don't dispute that college can be a wise investment, but they also say that unionized craft workers can earn more than the average college graduate.

Advanced Technology Services Inc., a Peoria, Ill., factory-maintenance company that employs 2,300 workers, organized a field trip to a factory for a local high school in April and is helping fund a training program for high-school graduates at a cost of \$1,500 per student. The program tutors them in a variety of skills. It is planning to host other high schools for visits in the coming year.

Michael Arndt, training director for the 300,000-member United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe Fitting Industry of the U.S. and Canada, says a journeyman in his union -- someone who has graduated from an apprenticeship -- could earn about \$30 an hour, or \$1,050 for a 35-hour workweek. By comparison, median weekly earnings for workers 25 and older with only a bachelor's degree amounted to \$999 in the second quarter of 2008, according to the Labor Department.

"To the extent that people are picking college, they're turning down construction," says Kenneth D. Simonson, chief economist for the Associated General Contractors of America, an Arlington, Va., trade group.

To encourage young people to think about a future in the building trades, Mr. Simonson's group has put together kits for elementary-school students that show, among other things, how to build a bridge out of popsicle sticks.

This month, Mr. Arndt's plumbers and pipe fitters union, launched a pilot program at one of its Washington state training centers offering an 18-week welding course to state National Guardsmen returning from the Middle East. Graduates will be admitted to the second year of the union's apprenticeship program. The union is also lobbying the Marines Corps to allow it to bring mobile welding training trailers to Camp Pendleton in California, so it can offer a similar program to soldiers there who are awaiting their discharge, according to retired Gen. Matthew Caulfield, a consultant to the United Association.

Write to Anton Troianovski at anton.troianovski@wsj.com