

# New Orleans Unions Plant Seeds for Growth With First Preapprentice Training Program

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By Angelle Bergeron

Hoping to boost its visibility in an open shop stronghold and bolster numbers and skill levels of a badly needed craft workforce, the AFL-CIO's Building and Construction Trades Dept. is bringing its message to the Hurricane Katrina recovery zone through a fast-track training and job placement center that will feed recruits to union apprentice programs for the first time.

The Gulf Coast Construction Careers Center in New Orleans is a joint venture between the building trades and the Louisiana Works Workforce Commission, a state-funded workforce development program. "Our goal is to deliver 225 people per year, 675 in a three-year time period," says Art Lujan, the center's executive director. "We want to achieve the highest possible number because the industry needs them." The AFL-CIO is using the program to test innovative strategies and develop a template for fast-track training in other low-density union markets, he adds.

When AFL-CIO President John Sweeney visited New Orleans in June 2006 to announce a \$1-billion labor-sponsored Gulf Coast revitalization program, he promised to include a workforce development pilot project to help the struggling area meet anticipated reconstruction labor demand. In August, the center will graduate its third class of pre-apprentices, introducing the first trickle of new recruits. Lujan says a \$3-million state block grant that will fund the center "just got finalized." Eager to jumpstart training, the AFL-CIO's Housing Investment Trust is adding \$1 million. "The problem is there is money on the street, but no one knows how to utilize it for training. We are used to training," says Lujan.

The first of the three-week-long, all-day preapprentice training sessions are being held in a local ironworkers' hiring hall, with plans for a permanent facility later this summer. The program is designed to stimulate reconstruction of homes and the city's devastated middle class through job skill training and union-funded projects to put people to work.



Angelle Bergeron/ENR

**Major reconstruction projects in New Orleans such as the 17th Street Canal need more skilled craft workers.**

**"We are trying to entrench ourselves in the community. It will take a whole village to develop a workforce."**

— Art Lujan, Training Center Director

But union executives admit that project funding is also bogged down. The AFL-CIO committed \$750 million to local reconstruction in the New Orleans area, but to date, no specific projects have been earmarked. "Things have not gone as fast as we had hoped two years ago," says Tom O'Malley, director of the housing fund's community investment initiatives.

He and other top union officials were on hand at the June 22 graduation of the program's first class to encourage students and publicly tout the AFL-CIO's presence. "On behalf of the people I represent, three million strong, welcome to the family," said Sean McGarvey, building trades' department secretary-treasurer.

With many remaining obstacles in post-Katrina New Orleans, that family will likely have to pool its vast resources to ensure that the preapprentice program is a success. The first class of 22 was followed by one of 16 and only a dozen are set to graduate in August.

One problem is the program's grant-required pre-admission testing, which is performed by a local technical college. "That's been a chokepoint, the fact that we can't get enough people tested in order to generate a full class," says Lujan. "Only 25% of those taking the exams are passing, so we have to do some additional remediation." He is already working with the American Federation of Teachers and the Urban League, among other groups. "We are trying to entrench ourselves in the community and partner with other organizations who are doing good stuff," Lujan says. "It will take a whole village to develop a workforce."

Center officials also cite the recovery zone's other issues. "We know the pool of recruits will be smaller than what we need here because of the lack of adequate, affordable housing and public transportation," Lujan says. "If you don't have reliable transportation that will carry you into surrounding parishes or across [Lake Pontchartrain], your chances for success are going to be very limited because there is not that much work going on in New Orleans. That's what makes everything so complicated here."

The state grant requires that at least 51% of each class of students live in New Orleans, and had to have been affected by the storm. Classes include intensive training in life skills, remedial math and introduction to various craft apprentice programs. Upon completion of preapprentice training, attendees will be paid a stipend of \$10 per hour for 120 hours.

Students are recruited to the program through various channels, including state efforts, technical schools, corrections programs, local sherriffs and faith-based organizations. "I talked to a lot of mothers and sat in a lot of living rooms," says Maria Alexander, worker services coordinator. Born and reared in New Orleans, Alexander spent the last 20 years in New York City working for non-profits and community building programs. "I decided to come home after Katrina," she says. "I had given New York 20 years, and it was time to come home and help people I know. We had bigger problems here." Alexander, whose father was in the plasterers' union, views the program as not just workforce training but a stepping stone to rebuild lives. "This is not only to help them get a job or build a house, but to change their attitude about work," she says.

Alexander is pushing hard to bring more women into the program, fighting the prevailing "Southern belle" perception, she says, adding that the center is working with a University of New Orleans' women's group, a professional women's football team and others. She is also recruiting in the city's hurricane-hit Vietnamese and Hispanic enclaves.



Angelle Bergeron/ENR  
**Sean McGarvey, secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO's Building and Construction Trades Dept., welcomed program graduates in June to union construction.**



Angelle Bergeron/ENR  
**Marty Branighan Jr. director of the New Orleans Electrical Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee, gives students facts about being an apprentice, including wage rates and advancement opportunities**

Byron Jackson was in the first graduating class and is currently working as an electrician's apprentice for local contractor Walter D. Barnes Electric. After evacuating to Georgia, losing all his possessions to floodwaters and having his family scattered across the country, he suffered the death of both his wife and son. "I guess I was like Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz. There's no place like home," Jackson says about his decision to return to the city. "I looked at this as a chance for me to get started again," Jackson says of the preapprentice training program. "Art [Lujan] said something the very first day that captivated me; he said, 'We're not preparing you for a job. We're preparing you for a career.'"



Angelle Bergeron/ENR

**Byron Jackson, who lost much during Hurricane Katrina, hopes to make a new start as an electrician's apprentice.**

Lujan touts the union training model and potential. "We have the ability to break cycles of poverty and exploitation and rebuild the middle class here and throughout the rest of the country," he says. The fast-track training becomes a paid introduction to AFL-CIO apprenticeship programs, which have experienced a decline in recent years. "Wages have been depressed, especially in the south, so no one has been able to recruit to the industry," Lujan says. "Very few people here know what a boilermaker is, but we need 5,000 boilermakers right now, today. We are interested in improving wages and benefits with construction."

Nationwide, the construction industry's workforce shortage stems from a combination of factors—natural attrition of the existing workforce, a failure to attract new people to the industry, aging infrastructure and major capital programs. "It was like that before the [2005] storms, but they just made it worse," says Kenneth Naquin, CEO of Louisiana Associated General Contractors. "In Louisiana, we need 90,000 workers by 2009. We need all trades."

Although the union used to have a stronger presence in Louisiana, "since right-to-work [legislation], there has been a definite decline in wages and benefits," says Morty Branighan Jr., director of the local Electrical Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee. "We just aren't keeping pace with the rest of the country." Katrina further accelerated the falloff. "We lost 30 to 40% of our apprentices because they had to move and haven't returned," Branighan says. Indeed, all of the local trades experienced similar losses, as well as having their hiring halls and training facilities destroyed by floodwaters. "I could probably put 25 or 30 electricians to work tomorrow if I had them," Branighan says. "Our contractors aren't calling as often because they understand we don't have the people to send out anymore, and it's the same across the craft lines. We just can't get people."



Angelle Bergeron/ENR

**John W. Cowherd Sr., plasterers' union international field representative, gets down and dirty with students about concrete work. "It's a hard work. It's a trade of choice. You've got to want to do it."**



Angelle Bergeron/ENR

**Student TaRyan Theophile: "I need a job with security, and I need a change in my life. I need to look forward to the future."**

The problem is further exacerbated by inflated wages being paid by out-of-state contractors, say local union leaders. Andy O' Brien, a training director with Local 53 of the heat & frost insulators & asbestos workers union referred to "carpetbaggers" who he claims have flocked to the area to make quick money and exploit workers. "We don't train for the money," he says. "We train for the industry."

Even if the program meets the 675-graduate goal in three years, "it's just a drop in the bucket of what we need," Naquin says, noting new union efforts as well as nonunion training programs such as the Business Roundtable's "I'm GREAT" campaign linked to the Gulf Coast Workforce Initiative. "Certainly making wages attractive and offering training are important," Naquin says, but he doesn't see any resolution "until we get everyone together, union and non-union, to talk about their needs and what we are doing, and decide they are willing to invest the money."

But economic development officials say the center is a step in the right direction. "You hear that all the time that whatever we do for Louisiana workforce at this time is a drop in the bucket," says John Stewart, manager of the state's \$38-million workforce training grant program. "It may be, but we've got to start somewhere. We've got to get moving. If you generate 300 welders this year, does that cover the need? No. But that's 300 more welders than we had before, and they are 300 Louisiana welders."