

## The Skilled Trades Working for You, Working for Michigan

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Employees Association



*Members of the Michigan State Employees Association (MSEA) joined the Right-to-Work protest at the state Capitol in Lansing, Dec. 2012. MSEA was founded in 1950 and represents state employees in 17 departments in two bargaining units--Labor and Trades, and Safety and Regulatory. MSEA also represents the Osceola County Road Commission and the power plant employees at Western Michigan University. MSEA is affiliated with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Local 5 of the AFL-CIO.*

**W**ash your hands. Stick together. Take a nap. Clean up your mess. Our schools do a good job of teaching these fundamentals to children. But Robert Fulghum points out in “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,” that if we all—including adults—just took care of the basics, the world would be a lot better place for everyone. This sense of community awareness and involvement can reap big bene-

fits when it translates into action that demonstrates the very type of concerns taught to children in kindergarten. Workers in the skilled trades know that what they do is important. Sometimes it can save a life...and sometimes an entire community.

***“It doesn’t matter what you say you believe—it only matters what you do.”***

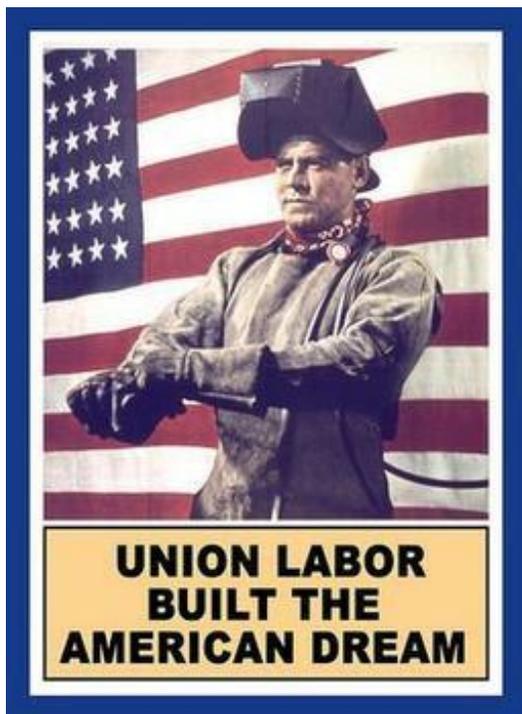
***—Robert Fulghum, All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten***

Three hundred volunteer union plumbers from across Michigan fanned out in Flint on Saturday, Jan. 30, 2016. They drove in from Lansing, Detroit, Saginaw and other cities to help United Association (UA) Local 370 in Flint whose plumbers have been installing filters and faucets to get lead out of residents’ water since October. By the end of the day, the plumbers had visited 1,100 homes. Local 370 will keep on volunteering since it’s estimated there is a need for about 6,000 new faucets in Flint homes so residents can use the free water filters provided by the state. Plumbing Manufacturers International (PMI) donated hundreds of faucets and supplies; plumbers affiliated with the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipe-Fitting Industry (UA) did the installations.

On September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks killed nearly 3,000 people and injured many more, bringing horrific destruction to New York City, the Pentagon, and the fields outside Shanksville, Penn. Rescue and recovery efforts following the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City involved iron workers, structural engineers, heavy machinery operators, asbestos workers, boilermakers, carpenters, cement masons, construction managers, electricians, insulation workers, machinists, plumbers and pipefitters, riggers, sheet metal workers, steelworkers, truckers and teamsters,

and many others. Built on the site of the twin towers destroyed in the 9-11 attacks, is the “Freedom Tower,” which opened on Nov. 3, 2014. At 104 floors and standing 1,776 feet tall, it’s now New York City’s tallest skyscraper built by \$4 billion and union labor.

These two examples show us the importance of skilled trades to communities, yet the skilled trades are disappearing at an alarming rate. An aging workforce, a shrinking middle class, the cutting of vocational and technical education in school curriculums, manufacturing jobs drying up, and increased attacks on unions are some of the reasons.



According to Dr. Dale Belman, professor of labor relations and economics at Michigan State University, in the *Construction Labor Report*, “The housing market will never be at the 2006 level. It’s going to be a long ways away from it for some time.” He added: “They need to make jobs more attractive to bring the workers into them.” So what’s being done to make

skilled trades jobs more attractive to workers? Let’s take a look at the landscape.

In January 2016, The Bureau of Labor Statistics released data that shows the percent of wage and salary workers in Michigan who were members of unions increased from 14.5% in 2014 to 15.2% in 2015. Labor unions in Michigan added approximately 36,000 new members last year. But Michigan was only one of two Great Lakes states to see an increase in union membership in 2015: Illinois was up slightly from 15.1% in 2014 to 15.2% in 2015; Ohio was down from 12.4% in 2014 to 12.3% in 2015; Indiana was down from 10.7% in 2014 to 10.0% in 2015.

Wisconsin was down from 11.7% in 2014 to 8.3% in 2015; and Minnesota was unchanged from 14.2% in 2014 to 14.2% in 2015. Nationally, the union membership rate held steady at 11.1% from 2014 to 2015. Compare this with union membership in the Scandinavian countries: In Norway, that number is 52%; in Denmark, 67%; in Sweden, 70%.

In a press release on the statistics, Ron Bieber, President of the Michigan AFL-CIO, stated: “Despite the unrelenting attacks from Lansing politicians, working people understand the value of collective bargaining. A union contract gives working people the power to speak up together with one clear voice for fair wages, strong benefits, and time to be with family. And when working people earn wages that can sustain a family, it helps our small businesses and creates more jobs. Lansing needs to get the message, and start working together to make Michigan’s economy work for all of us, not just the wealthy.”

A recent article published in *Forbes* magazine featured a poll conducted by several Harvard professors of more than 2,700 Harvard Business School alumni on the U.S. economy and the current competitiveness of American firms. According to *Forbes*, American and

global business elite are starting to believe that income inequality is a serious threat to the country and to their businesses. [The researchers] find that, “respondents remain pessimistic on balance about the likelihood that firms will lift American living standards by paying higher wages and benefits in the near term. Shared prosperity is not around the corner.”

State officials in Michigan estimate there are 8,300 job openings in a variety of skilled trades. Governor Rick Snyder has promoted job retraining and vocational education in order to fill job openings, citing a lack of qualified candidates for open positions.

“There seems to be a real disconnect between the governor’s eagerness to recruit qualified workers for the skilled trades, and corporate attempts to weaken unions,” said Ken Moore, President of the Michigan State Employees Association (MSEA). “The repeal of prevailing wage is a case in point.”



Michigan’s prevailing wage law requires contractors to provide workers with union scale wages and benefits on state-funded construction projects, such as schools and government buildings. Critics say the law inflates costs on projects that utilize taxpayer dollars and puts Michigan at a competitive disadvantage compared to states that have scrapped their own versions. Unions and other supporters say it guarantees fair wages and promotes quality

work that will provide a better bargain in the long run. (MLive.com, 8-26-15).



The prevailing wage issue isn’t unique to Michigan. In West Virginia, local union contractors fear that the prevailing wage requirement for state-funded projects could be eliminated altogether during this year’s session, according to an article by Joselyn King, “Contractors Lobby to Keep Prevailing Wage on the Job,” published in *The Intelligencer* on Jan. 14, 2016. In Ohio, its prevailing wage law has been eliminated for state-funded construction projects, allowing contractors to hire lesser trained workers, according to Matthew Mansuetto, president of Mansuetto Roofing of Martins Ferry, who is quoted in *The Intelligencer* article.

A Huffington Post commentary, entitled, “It’s Time to Re-Build, Re-Train, and Rejuvenate America,” by Sean McGarvey, President of North America’s Building Trades Unions, states:

Infrastructure jobs—especially jobs in the skilled construction craft trades—represent long-term, well-paid career opportunities for many of the two-thirds of U.S. workers who lack four-year college degrees. Jobs in the union construction sector not only boast strong middle class wages and benefits, as well as rela-

tively low barriers to entry, but when public infrastructure investments are tethered to apprenticeship-readiness and formal apprenticeship programs, they can be leveraged into a proven and viable career training pathway that can elevate people out of poverty and into the middle class, especially for historically neglected communities, such as communities of color, women and military veterans. In many cases, graduating from a formal skilled craft apprenticeship can lift not one, but two, and sometimes even three, generations of a single family onto the ladder to the middle class.



After all, in 1950s middle class America, it was unions—at their highest membership then—that created the middle class.

“A union wage scale helps increase wages for all workers. Those groups who want to repeal prevailing wage, want to cut everyone’s wages in order to increase their own profits,” said Moore. “If workers lose prevailing wage, it’s doubtful they’ll get it back.”

There are many excellent reasons to pursue a career in the constructions trades. Helmets to Hardhats (H2H) helps military service members successfully transition back into civilian life by offering them the means to secure a quality career. As the H2H website notes:

- Federal approved apprenticeship training programs come at no cost to the veteran.
- No prior experience required. The three-to-five-year apprenticeship programs teach

you everything you need to work in a specialized skilled craft.

- Because these are federally-approved programs, you can use your Montgomery G.I. Bill benefits to supplement your income. Better yet, apprenticeship programs offer the opportunity to earn while you learn.
- Continue to serve as part of your local community.

Governor Rick Snyder of Michigan has said he opposes repeal of the prevailing wage law, fearing it could harm his efforts to promote careers in the skilled trades. However, another obstacle to re-establishing the skilled trades in Michigan is a lack of funding.



“It can’t be stressed enough that the failure to invest in vocational programs in our middle and high schools severely restricts the future of our workforce,” said Moore. “Vocational programs allow students to explore various career paths.”

“Often, the first budget cuts are in the areas of vocational education,” he continued. “The ongoing trend of cutting education has had catastrophic effects on vocational programs throughout Michigan. The result is a serious shortfall of trained workers who have the necessary education and qualifications to participate in the skilled trades.”

Michigan has the potential to become a world leader in STEM education and careers, due to strong talent, educational institutions

and thriving industries, according to a report released the beginning of March 2016 by the MiSTEM Advisory Council. STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. The MiSTEM Advisory Council was created in 2015 to develop recommendations on ways to promote STEM education and careers around the state. The MiSTEM Advisory Council includes business, higher education, K-12 education and philanthropic leaders, as well as state legislators.



In a press release from the Michigan Department of Education about the report, State Superintendent Brian Whiston stated: “Every student being able to take STEM programming is a key strategy in building Michigan into a Top 10 education state in 10 years. Let’s take this opportunity and put it into gear.” The MiSTEM Advisory Council will publish recommendations annually; the council’s approach to STEM in Michigan focuses on four key efforts including:

- 1) Creating a new culture of STEM
- 2) Strengthening the educator pipeline
- 3) Integration between business and education
- 4) Ensuring quality STEM experience.

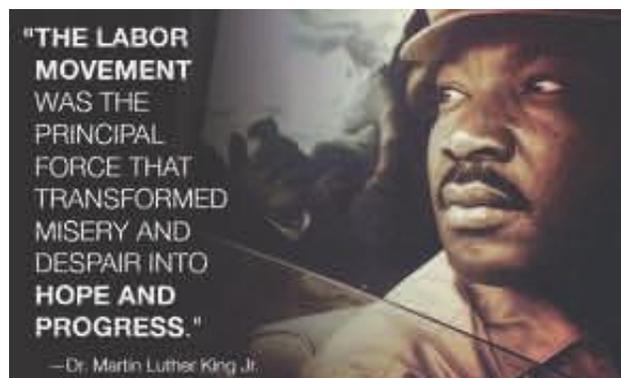
According to the STEM website:

The work of the Partnership is guided by a statewide Board comprised of employers, educators, and other partners. For administrative purposes, the state is divided into five hubs and the work of each STEM hub is directed by a leadership team, also made up of employers and educators. The Board sets the overall strategic direction for the work of the Partnership through a 5-year strategic plan and annual operational plans. Each hub leadership team creates an annual operational plan that determined STEM activities that will advance local efforts while supporting the work of the Partnership. All plans include performance metrics that are reported annually. The Partnership is playing an important role in answering questions such as:

- What skills will be needed in the new economy and how are they developed?
- What is happening across the state to assist people who want to develop STEM skills?
- What and where are the new jobs going to be?

Women comprise less than 25% of the STEM workforce. Fifty percent of women in STEM careers drop out in the first 10 years. Over the past five years, high school boys’ interest in STEM is increasing, while girls’ interest in STEM is decreasing. The gender gap in interest in STEM appears in middle schools, even at a point while girls are still out-performing boys in math and science. At a press conference on March 4, 2016, The Michigan Science Center joined with Detroit Public Television and Detroit leaders in a STEM-and-girls partnership. The goal is to increase involvement of women in the STEM workforce via their STEMInista Project which aims to spark interest in STEM in elementary and middle schools girls. A goal of the Project is to “engage girls with authentic STEM experiences designed to increase interest, confidence and skill sets in STEM.

Through these encounters, we will inspire girls to leverage their interests and skills into the STEM careers and STEMpreneurship that support their dreams and create meaningful impact in the world.”



The skilled trades have traditionally been a way for workers to earn a decent living wage and to support a family. A return to investing in vocational and technical education is crucial. The American dream isn't dead, but it has become much more difficult to achieve. A renewed emphasis on preparing individuals for careers in the skilled trades, along with union membership opportunities, would once again make this an attractive, viable option.

In 1865, a national eight-month strike by the Sons of Vulcan, a union of iron forgers, ended in victory when employers agreed to a wage scale based on the price of iron bars. This was the first union contract in the iron and steel industry—and what may be the first union contract of any kind in the United States. Unions are workers who stand together to establish, build and defend worker rights. When they win, everyone wins. The skilled trades expand career opportunities through formal apprenticeship training and education. This provides individuals with skills that last a lifetime and ensures a foothold on the ladder to a safe and secure life in the middle class.

Union workers support our communities in times of prosperity and in times of crisis. Re-

cently, stickers were distributed to all union members to put on their checks, credit card receipts, invoices, utility bills and on the front and back of envelopes being mailed. Each bright yellow sticker let merchants know where the money for their services came from and stated, “This Payment Made Possible By Union Wages.”

Wouldn't it be great if the government recognized and supported workers' contributions to society? And wouldn't it be beneficial for everyone if schools offered students opportunities for shared prosperity? I will end with a quote that President John F. Kennedy used frequently when talking about economic justice: “A rising tide lifts all boats.”

## FRIDAY, MAY 29, 2015, LANSING



Michigan Building and Construction Trades Council Legislative Director Patrick “Shorty” Gleason issued this statement May 13 after the Michigan Senate Competitiveness Committee approved legislation to repeal the state's prevailing wage law and remove its reference from other statutes. The entire Senate voted 22-15 the next day on a package of bills to repeal prevailing wage, bringing the state a step closer to permanently reducing the wages of thousands of Michigan's construction workers.

“It’s a sad state of affairs and a real slap in the face for Michigan workers across the state when a Senate committee can gut a 50-year bill in the span of 90 minutes or less without any meaningful form of due diligence. On top of that, it’s a complete disregard for the working class when you tie \$75,000 in appropriations that in no way can be reversed. Michigan legislators have stuck it to the working class in a way that we could never have imagined.

“To say those in favor of repealing prevailing wage are dangerously naive about the construction trades is a major understatement. Quite frankly, it is irresponsible for Michigan’s leaders to consider the creation of an environment that incentivizes less training; less safety; less health care; less retirement care; and less interest in the skilled trades as a career choice.

“The model in place now delivers a quality, safe construction project on time and on budget. The need for health care, retirement care and training are very real concerns for us, and the financial burden to pay for those benefits should not be passed on to the hardworking taxpayers of Michigan.

“This is not a union vs non-union issue. It’s a quality of life—and workmanship—issue. We (unions affiliated with the Michigan Building and Construction Trades Council) invested \$42 million in skilled trades training this past year and have plans to spend more in the future. This legislation, however, rips the heart out of our budget and places real limitations on what we can afford to spend.

“MITA (Michigan Infrastructure Transportation Authority) executive Mike Nystrom hit the nail on the head: “Can you imagine an established company with an experienced workforce trained to build a finished project in a safe, timely and efficient manner that pays competitive wages for skilled labor at an industry-accepted level, competing against a company that pays minimum wage to its employees to take on the challenging and often hazardous duties of being a construction worker? The skill and expertise needed to build these sophisticated projects deserve to be paid a fair, industry accepted wage.

—*Courtesy, The Building Tradesman Newspaper*

*Karen Murphy is Communications Director for the Michigan State Employees Association. A graduate of Michigan State University, she earned a B.A. degree in journalism. She has been honored by the International Association of Business Communicators, the Labor Heritage Foundation, and has received over 30 awards from the Michigan Labor Press.*

*Ken Moore has worked in state government for over 15 years and has held a variety of leadership positions in the Michigan State Employees Association. He was elected President by the membership in 2010, and re-elected in 2012 and 2015. A lifelong resident of Michigan, he is committed to improving working conditions for labor and the middle class. He believes that Union membership offers the opportunity to work toward common goals in sound economic policies in state government.*