

Steelworker Retirements To Create Experience Gap

Vicki Smith, Associated Press Writer

WEIRTON, W.Va. (AP) — In the business of steelmaking, a gray-haired work force can be a good thing: Seasoned employees in the mill signify experience and safety, reliability and commitment.

At ArcelorMittal's tin mill in West Virginia, they also represent a looming problem. As many as half the 1,000 workers in Weirton — average age 57 — are likely to retire before the current contract expires in 2012. And the traditional pool of replacements has vanished.

Now, the Luxembourg-based company and the United Steelworkers union are working on a way to make sure they're ready for the inevitable changing of the guard. Though still preliminary, talks are under way with community colleges to expand ArcelorMittal's "Steelworker for the Future" training program beyond Indiana and Illinois, to places like Weirton.

"Almost every person here has over 30 years of service. Some have 50. So we're a very seasoned work force," says Mark Glyptis, president of USW Local 2911. "We don't want all that knowledge going out the door with those guys."

Glyptis believes even more of his members would retire if not for the recession. Now, many are trying to rebuild their 401(k) accounts.

In the old days, the 58-year-old union leader says, their sons and daughters would have been waiting in the wings, enrolled in four- to six-year in-house apprenticeships, talking about the day's events at the mill over dinner tables, and ultimately assuming their parents' and grandparents' jobs.

But as the changing global economy forced U.S. steelmakers to shut down or consolidate, those conversations died. As the 1990s were ending, the industry was shedding tens of thousands of jobs, and more than 40 companies went bankrupt. Most shut down for good.

"We didn't think there was a future for our children in the mill, and we were talking more about going to college and getting an education," Glyptis says. "We lost a generation there, and this is an attempt to let our community and other communities know that steel industry is still a vibrant industry."

Last summer, the USW estimated only about 60,000 workers nationwide are employed in the production and finishing of steel. The number is likely smaller now, as many mills have cut back on production in response to slumping demand, says Tony Montana, spokesman for the Pittsburgh-based union.

Steelworker Retirements To Create Experience Gap

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

ArcelorMittal, which employs about 14,000 USW members nationwide, created "Steelworker for the Future" in response. Today, more than half its employees are eligible for retirement, says spokeswoman MaryBeth Holford.

The poor economy and layoffs have postponed ArcelorMittal's plans to launch the training program for the West Virginia mill, but Holford says the company will continue to expand "when appropriate."

Weirton's workers are older than the national steelworker average of around 50, but the USW says its situation is not unusual. That makes "Steelworkers for the Future" a vital part of the current contract.

While mills that produce raw steel continue to require brawn and brains, finishing operations like Weirton require more of the latter. There, steel sheets are coated with tin and chrome for use in can-making, relying on complex, computerized systems to keep production humming with far fewer people than a decade ago.

"Better training equals more opportunities for advancement and safer workplaces. Everyone wins," says Montana. "Highly skilled electrical and mechanical maintenance technicians in particular can be tough to find."

The training program offers a 2½-year curriculum that includes 24 weeks of onsite training, currently through Ivy Tech Community College in Indiana and Prairie State College in Illinois. Graduates earn an associate's degree in applied science as either a mechanical or electrical technician.

Though they're not guaranteed a job, they have the potential to start out earning \$17.39 an hour, with three weeks vacation, medical benefits, a 401(k) and profit-sharing.

Weirton plant manager Brian James says they also have portable skills that could land them jobs outside the steel industry. But the fact that Weirton is even talking about training illustrates a key point, he says. For the first time in more than a decade, Weirton can look beyond mere survival, to the future.

"We're starting to think about 2012," he says. "A couple of years ago, we were thinking about tomorrow."

Follow [IMPO on Twitter!](#) [1]

Source URL (retrieved on 12/25/2014 - 10:04pm):

http://www.impomag.com/news/2009/08/steelworker-retirements-create-experience-gap?qt-recent_content=0

Links:

Steelworker Retirements To Create Experience Gap

Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

[1] <http://www.twitter.com/IMPOMag/>