

Educational Partnership Improves 'Steelworker for the Future'

BURNS HARBOR, Ind. (AP) — Andrew Sweeney said it wasn't part of his initial plan to work in the steel industry.

Hired earlier this year as an electrical maintenance technician working at ArcelorMittal Burns Harbor, Sweeney said his thoughts changed once he enrolled in a training program that helped him snag a job with the world's largest steelmaker.

ArcelorMittal has hired four of five recent graduates of Steelworker for the Future, a training partnership launched two years ago to bring more craft workers into the steel industry, said Mark Langbehn, manager of hourly employee training at ArcelorMittal USA.

The partnership is a 2-1/2 year program that includes four semesters of classroom training at Ivy Tech Community College or Prairie State College and 24 weeks of on-site training at ArcelorMittal facilities.

About 80 students currently are enrolled in program.

"The work is highly technical and changes depending on the project," Sweeney, 30, of Matteson, said of his job in the mill. "I had an electrical background and still was amazed at the size of the machinery and complexity of the maintenance work needed."

Langbehn said the company knows the need to replace workers over the next few years is great. ArcelorMittal facilities in Northwest Indiana lose about 7.5 percent of their workers each year. That, coupled with an expected onslaught of retirements in the next five to 10 years, is exacerbating the need to find educated workers, including those who can repair sophisticated pieces of equipment in a variety of industrial environments.

Steelworker for the Future is one component of the company's hiring plans, and efforts are underway to promote the program's profile. In the last few weeks, open houses took place at Ivy Tech campuses in Valparaiso and East Chicago, where representatives from the school and company encouraged people to enroll.

Langbehn said he's met with school superintendents from Lake and Porter counties, and the program has been showcased at career and technical schools and adult job fairs. Salaries for new employees through Steelworker for the Future program would have a starting salary of about \$40,000 per year in base pay, and a benefit package including pension, health care and profit sharing.

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He often tells the message that "there are solid, safe, sustainable jobs in steel, and it's a good livelihood, and there's a good opportunity there."

Mike Fish, an electrical maintenance technician at ArcelorMittal Burns Harbor, said the training was beneficial to him because of the hands-on experience he received.

"I knew I had to take advantage of this type of opportunity and more people should," said Fish, a 47-year-old Monee resident. "I definitely recommend seeking a career in the steel industry - there is demand for motivated, well-trained workers."

Steelworker for the Future is expected to launch partnerships in Philadelphia and Weirton, W. Va., in spring 2011.

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