

WED NEWS

From the California Labor Federation – AFL-CIO

2004 Building Partnerships Conference in Review

By Tracy Baxter

Held in San Diego over two days in May, this year's Building Partnership conference owed its success to location and timing -- but not for obvious reasons. Although San Diego is a favorite destination of summer sun worshippers, it's also a city that has made significant strides in workforce and economic development and is working on a living wage law.

A number of union and union-related meetings were held simultaneously at the Holiday Inn by the Bay: the Working for America Institute's Western Regional Conference for Labor Representatives of Workforce Investment Boards, the State Fed's annual Central Labor Council conference, a Trade Assistance Act training for Region 6 of the Department of Labor, a meeting training providers of the Sheet Metal I, plus a meeting of the California Apollo Alliance.

"The variety of labor groups under one roof allowed for cross-pollination and dissemination of key workforce development concepts and goals," said WED executive director Pat Wise, "and that kind of communication is key to our being able to advocate effectively as a movement for high-road jobs that offer wages families can thrive on and health and retirement benefits."

Workshops explored capturing resources from the Workforce Investment Act, the Trade Assistance Act and the Employment Training Panel to help workers get and keep good jobs. Many speakers also addressed the state's ongoing fiscal crisis and the need for public funding accountability.

In a workshop on standards and accountability in workforce and economic development, Phaedra Ellis Lamkins, executive officer of the South Bay Central Labor Council, pointed out that often "public dollars are poured into projects where there are no required measures of benefits," recommending that WIB labor representatives weigh in on development projects early in the process to push for community benefits such as first source hiring, outreach to potential workers through recruitment fairs, developer contributions to work training centers in addition to ongoing job training, health benefits, and good wages.

Other workshops highlighted the role labor should play in the operations of one-stops, how labor can use self-sufficiency standards as a tool for high-wage job creation, and how interested parties can construct labor-management partnerships that move workers up the career ladder of success. In both a hands-on workshop on how unions

can target industry sectors, and in a presentation on the Apollo Alliance, the state fed's chief of staff Kirsten Snow-Spalding encouraged labor to take a "big picture" approach.

The biggest picture of the state of work and labor's ability to shape working conditions was drawn during the general session discussion of globalization and the U.S. economy. Jerry Butkiewicz, secretary treasurer of the San Diego/Imperial Central Labor Council and Harley Shaiken, professor and director of the Center for Latin American Studies at UC Berkeley, outlined the worker impacts of NAFTA, outsourcing, and corporate profiteering.

Butkiewicz and Shaiken agreed that the continued globalization of our economy was inevitable, and even potentially positive, but NAFTA, Shaiken said, was a "squandered opportunity." He added that cross border trade has more than tripled but the average worker in Mexico makes 10% less than before

the trade agreement and an eye-popping 35% less than in 1984.

In 2000, 109,000 workers died in industrial accidents in China. Workers in the software industry in the Bengal region of India do not have the right to strike. Laying out some of the implications for U.S. workers, Shaiken said, "These countries are now setting the standards of global production. In job quality and working conditions we are in a race to the bottom as to who can squeeze the workforce most tightly. Companies that want to take the high road are pressured to compete on these terms."

Summing up the impact of the two-day event, Pat Wise said, "In putting together the annual Building Partnerships conference, we strive to present practical information on creating high quality jobs and supporting laid off workers. Judging from the conference feedback we collected and the calls we continue to receive, our workshops and speakers met and exceeded expectations."