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Layton Ehmke/MEDILL

Pictured on their lunch break, Butler Street Foundry employees Javier Gonzalez (left) and Hugo Rodriguez could benefit from new training programs in the manufacturing sector.

A call to redesign the philosophy for training to the job

by LAYTON EHMKE

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As the White House sponsors a summit on labor in early December, some believe that education and training should be part of the discussion.

Bob Wordlaw, executive director of the Chicago Jobs Council, said now is the time to devise an employment and training strategy – something that prepares people to access work, he said.

In the current dire unemployment scene, the jobs that do come up are being taken by already skilled people, leaving few opportunities for unskilled labor.

"In the auto industry, the Cash for Clunkers program created a few thousand jobs," Wordlaw said. "So there are peaks of sunlight coming in through the clouds. But what we really need have to do is coordinate the training with the jobs that come."

He suggests re-vamping the way employees are trained. One missing link, Wordlaw said, was that training organizations haven't been in one-on-one contact with the manufacturing industry.

"It's going to be an interesting dilemma," he said. "This is a time to re-vamp the whole training system. Where we have 15 or 16 different training organizations, couldn't we improve that by putting it in fewer sites"?

He mentioned the now-vacant Washburn Trade School on the South Side, a place that once trained students. But that system has been diluted. It could be strengthened by putting many specialized programs under one administrative umbrella that meets industry-recognized standards.

Re-worked training programs also could include a new version of the Works Progress Administration, a relief measure signed in 1935 by President Roosevelt. It put unemployed people to work building roads and sidewalks, cleaning slums, doing reforestation and rural upgrades. It worked then, Wordlaw said. So why not now?

Whatever comes of the White House's labor summit, Wordlaw said, an economic downturn is the right time to figure out the road to recovery.



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