

# Nostalgia hasn't much future in manufacturing

MILWAUKEE J-5

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2005 **17A**

**M**anufacturers in Wisconsin need to improve their image if they're to turn the youth of today into the workers of tomorrow, says a new report.

This would be easier if the auto industry weren't talking about which parts of its blue-collar paradise were going to be boarded up.

Delphi Corp.'s boss is asking the United Auto Workers to cut labor costs by more than half, citing competition. Delphi's workers, like those at auto-makers, have gold-plated health and retirement benefits that their productivity cannot support, say analysts.

Those benefits, the \$30-an-hour pay and a comfortable life for people with little education are what made manufacturing so attractive. So is it time to write manufacturing off?

No, contends Michael Klonsinski. He leads the Wisconsin Manufacturing Extension Partnership, which put out that report, and he points out that manufacturing accounts for half the state's economy.

There are particular clusters that are big, that are growing and that anchor networks of researchers, law-



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yers, accountants, truckers, suppliers, customers. They employ a lot of gray-haired baby boomers. Manufacturers here can escape Delphi's fate with more sophisticated products and processes, but they must replace those retirees.

If not, Wisconsin will have to come up with plan B for half its economy.

There are downsizings in any industry, Klonsinski says. Software has gone through a vicious round, "but people don't seem to want to shy away from it as a career," he says.

The thing to realize, say Klonsinski and others, is that manufacturing is changing, away from what the job-for-life auto industry represents. Some jobs went to China, but many more have vanished because manufacturing is more efficient. You now need fewer people, better trained, able to think independently, form teams, learn new

work and be flexible.

"A person in manufacturing doesn't walk in, then walk out 40 years later with a gold watch," says George Lightbourn, a scholar at the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute. "If you're a business that has that model, you won't be around long."

That manufacturing is more challenging may be its salvation, says Jeff Sachse, a state labor economist — kids will see that it's not a leave-your-brain-at-home career, though he says companies need to show some loyalty in hard times, too. Klonsinski says tech colleges and universities need to better attend to industries' needs.

With all this sunshine, however, there's a trade-off. If Wisconsin manufacturing really becomes a new-economy paragon of productivity and brain power, then we can't rely on it any longer as a fallback employer for people who lack skills or schooling.

Milwaukee poverty has been convincingly linked to the decline of central city factories. But reversing that poverty isn't simply a matter of persuading factories to plant themselves in poor neighborhoods. As late as the

1970s, Klonsinski points out, high school graduates usually had the skills for a career in manufacturing. That's seldom true now. Manufacturing has moved on.

For those high school graduates not going on, for those who read at an eighth-grade level and for the 40% of Milwaukee Public Schools students who simply quit, manufacturing offers little but jobs that could be done much cheaper in China — or just eliminated. Assuming policy-makers could line up an employer willing to pay richly anyhow, surely the fate of Delphi shows the limits of benevolence.

If government wants good manufacturing jobs for the poor, perhaps an effective course would be to fix K-12 education so more of its graduates were prepared to keep learning.

If Wisconsinites overall want the benefits of a manufacturing economy, they need to drop any lingering nostalgia about how far a high school education will take you.

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