



DILIP VISHWANAT | SLBJ

Carpenter apprentices work on mock rooftops in the wood training and residential framing area at the Carpenters Training Center.

LABOR UNIONS

# BLUE-COLLAR APPEAL

*Leaders of local trade unions say their skills training courses have taken off as the appeal of accessible blue-collar careers grows.*

**BY CONNOR HART**  
chart@bizjournals.com

**S**hawn Levin is tired of the notion that young trade workers only get into their professions after being deemed unfit for college.

That's why he spends a significant amount of time visiting high schools, technical schools and uni-

versities to educate potential students about the benefits of trade jobs in his role as director of the Electrical Industry Training Center, a local educational institution for electricians and communication technicians operated by the Electrical Connection, a partnership of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 1 and the St. Louis chapter of

the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA).

It's encouraging, Levin said, that students, parents and mentors seem to be more open to and interested in trade careers: "It isn't the taboo pathway that I think it once was," he said.

This changing perception has caused the Electrical Industry Training Center, and other industry-specific schooling centers across the St. Louis region, like the St. Louis Carpenters Training Center, to double down on recruitment and retention efforts, in addition to scaling up its offerings to meet the increased interest

in and demand for electrical work that's been seen in recent years.

There are currently around 750 apprentices enrolled at the Electrical Industry Training Center, up about 36% from when Levin assumed his role in 2021: "We have increased our capacity here at the Training Center to accommodate more apprentices," he said. "We want to make sure we can maintain those numbers, because we don't see the demand (for our work) going down anytime soon."

Non-trade unions – representing workers from a specific company, as opposed to a specific skilled trade – are also contrib-



uting to workforce development initiatives, though these efforts are often less direct than those of trade unions, which typically work as hiring halls, or organizations tasked with training up new recruits for employers with whom the unions have collective bargaining agreements, said International Brotherhood of Teamsters Local 688 Political Director Jim Barrett. Barrett about six months ago became a member of the St. Louis County Workforce Development Board, giving him a platform to voice Local 688's perspective of what skills its employers require of their workers, as well as what educational opportunities its members are seeking in the community, he said.

Membership across the region's largest 25 labor unions from 2021 to 2022 was up 1% to 86,291, reflecting a growth of nearly 1,000 workers, Business Journal research shows.

Missouri in 2023 had about 255,000 union members, a slight decrease from the roughly 257,000 members the state boasted in 2022. Nationwide, 14.4 million workers belonged to a union in 2023, up from about 14.3 million in 2022, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The union membership rate, or the overall percentage of wage and salary workers who were members of unions, in Missouri declined to 9.3% in 2023, from 9.6% in 2022. The rate in 2021 was 9.0%, down from 9.4% in 2020 and 11.1% in 2019, BLS data shows.

### Meeting demand

The Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council in 2023 had nearly 4,150 students enrolled across its two local training facilities – at 8300 Valcour Ave. in Affton and at 2290 S. Illinois St. in Belleville – up from about 3,350 students in 2021.

Director of Organizing R.J. Catizon utilizes “several different avenues” to recruit new carpenters, including boosting the union's presence on social media, which he said has helped attract more young people to the carpentry trade. He also attends more than 150 career fairs annually to speak with prospective members and said to never underestimate the importance of word of mouth, as having current carpenters and apprentices who speak highly of



DILIP VISHWANAT | SLBJ

*Instructor John Mormann works with carpenter apprentices work to construct mock rooftops in the wood training and residential framing area at the Carpenters Training Center.*

the trade is one of the most effective forms of recruitment.

Overall, St. Louis Regional Director Steve Pinkley over the last five years has seen “a lot more interest” in carpentry and other trade careers. A big reason for this, he said, is because the cost of attending a traditional four-year university has become prohibitively expensive.

However, getting folks interested in the trades is only half of the challenge.

“The industry is always changing and improving, and we have to stay on top of those changes if we’re going to be competitive,” Pinkley said. “The manufacturer pretty much demands that, and we tailor our training to the manufacturer’s specs on a lot of things.”

The United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America, the national arm of the Regional Council, has invested \$300 million in the Carpenters International Training Center, located in Las Vegas, which operates under a train-the-trainer model and disseminates the most up-to-date practices to regional training facilities throughout the country, Pinkley said.

The investment is financed through union dues and contractors, without the support of tax dollars: “It’s great that all partners – the union, our contractors and our members – view this as an investment and not a direct cost,” Pinkley said.

The Electrical Industry Train-

ing Center, which employs six full-time and 20 part-time instructors at 2300 Hampton Ave., similarly must constantly evolve its offerings. The center last year expanded its communication programs, as hybrid office- and other business connectivity-issues have become more common post-pandemic, Levin said.

The Electrical Connection, which invests \$3 million annually in training, in 2011 helped develop a national Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Training Program (EVITP) to support a then-nascent but emerging electric vehicle industry.

“As needs arise across the region, we have to meet that demand,” Levin said. “Whether it be along the lines of solar training, or electrical vehicle infrastructure – those are things that we have to find ways to integrate into the curriculum.”

### ‘Working in a broader range’

It’s harder for non-trade unions, such as Teamsters Local 688, to participate in the region’s workforce development initiatives, seeing as they aren’t looking to teach their workers a highly specialized set of skills, said Barrett, who recently joined the St. Louis County Workforce Development Board. However, that’s not to say non-trade unions are staying entirely out of the space.

Barrett last month traveled to the White House to participate in a Kansas/Missouri/Oklahoma eco-

nomie development roundtable discussion: “We’re working in a broader range by getting in front of various boards, and we are always reaching out to employers and seeing what their needs are,” he said.

His work stems from the belief that unions benefit employers and employees alike. Employers with the benefits that unions bargain for – like set wages, pensions and health care – find it easier to retain their employees, he said. And established contracts reduce the number of unknown variables in an employer’s operating costs, he added.

The goal of Teamsters Local 688, with more than 9,000 members in 2022, is to continue organizing. The local chapter represents workers from warehousing, vending and delivery service – with two of its largest employers being food, snack and beverage company PepsiCo and shipping and receiving company United Parcel Service (UPS). It recently brought on two more full-time staff members, bringing its total staff count to nearly 20, Barrett said.

Local 688 and Graybar – a Clayton-based, Fortune 500 company that distributes electrical, communications and data networking products – on March 12 reached a tentative contract deal, which calls for workers to receive an 18% increase in hourly wages over the four-year agreement, as well as a \$1,500 bonus on ratification. This comes on the heels of members of the Teamsters union working at Anheuser-Busch voting earlier this month to ratify a new five-year contract with the company.

Some of the efforts of non-trade unions haven’t been as successful.

Alex Barge in October 2021 began working as a barista at Starbucks’ Lindbergh & Clayton store, at 1500 S. Lindbergh Blvd. in Ladue, which was the coffeehouse chain’s first local store to unionize in March 2022.

As of March 1, workers at 510 Starbucks stores in 46 states have filed to unionize, according to More Perfect Union, a nonprofit news organization. But despite a years-long effort, Starbucks Workers United – a collection of unionized Starbucks partners across the country – is still waiting for Starbucks to sit at the bargaining table and establish a contract with its unionized workers, Barge said. 🚧

**9.3%**  
Missouri union member rate in 2023

**9.6%**  
Missouri union member rate in 2022