

Training gives St. Louis unions wage advantage

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Since it opened a year and a half ago, the Cortona at Forest Park apartment complex has served as the poster child for construction craftsmanship by union workers.

The \$42 million, 278-unit project at 5800 Highlands Plaza Drive just south of Forest Park was built entirely by union labor, as befitting a property that was largely financed with union money through the Washington, D.C.-based AFL-CIO Building Investment Trust.

Cortona Community Manager Mark Milford is glad the project was built with union hands.

“They did a terrific job,” said Milford, who added that the complex was fully leased within a year of its April 2014 completion. “The quality shows everywhere, and we have had very few problems or callbacks.”

It is the high level of craftsmanship, and the training behind it, that distinguishes union labor in the St. Louis area and which justifies the wages that union workers earn, according to St. Louis labor leaders.

“We are highly compensated in the St. Louis construction trades, reflecting our high levels of training and skills,” said David Zimmermann, president and business manager of Sheet Metal Workers Local 36. “I’ve never had any (project) owner say that our members are overpaid. It’s all about bringing the project in on time and on schedule without any callbacks.”

“The main issue is training,” said Pat White, president of the Greater St. Louis Labor Council, AFL-CIO. “We have some of the most state-of-the-art training facilities anywhere in the country, and with higher levels of training come higher pay.”

Zimmermann said the Sheet Metal Workers Local 36 Training School at 2319 Chouteau Ave. draws apprentice sheet metal workers from elsewhere in the country — a fact that he said reflects on the \$23 million investment that the union made in the training center when it opened in 2012. White said most of the construction trades in St. Louis provide for four-year training programs for apprentices. He cited the joint training program of the Associated General Contractors of Missouri and the Laborers International Union in High Hill, Missouri, as an example of a high-level worker training program.

According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and the U.S. Census Bureau, earnings for building tradesmen in St. Louis are generally higher than the national average. For example, the BLS reported that sheet metal workers in St. Louis earned an average of \$61,300 in 2014, compared with the national average of \$48,700. Electricians here made \$61,500 compared with a national average of \$54,520. Construction laborers earned \$47,230 in St. Louis compared to national earnings of \$35,750.

White said the St. Louis area has about 80,000 AFL-CIO union workers, plus the carpenters, who are not part of the AFL-CIO. Union carpenters are separately represented by the Carpenters’ District Council of Greater St. Louis. The carpenters’ union, which split from the AFL-CIO in 2001, reported that it represents about 24,000 carpenters, floor layers, millwrights, and other workers in Missouri, southern Illinois and Kansas. St. Louis carpenters number in the thousands, White said.

According to the carpenters’ website, a residential union carpenter in the St. Louis area earns an hourly package of \$44.11, including wages, pension contribution, and health and welfare benefits. According to the BLS, St. Louis carpenters earned an annual salary of \$54,900 in 2014, 20.4 percent higher than the national average.

Although local labor leaders point to the large number of union workers here for driving higher wages, they said that federal government earnings figures for St. Louis workers are overstated. Zimmermann said the federally generated statistics assume that a worker is working full time when, in fact, few tradesmen have that many hours.

“The statistics are based on 1,800 hours of work during the course of the year, and we have not had many working that many hours at any time during the last seven years,” Zimmermann said of his local’s sheet metal workers. “Manpower demand is down 30 percent from pre-recession levels.”

Local 36 members total about 3,000 statewide, Zimmermann said, and the Labor Department puts the St. Louis number of union and non-union sheet metal workers at 1,880. Zimmermann said that worker employment fluctuates widely each year as non-union residential heating and cooling companies open and close. More than 500 area heating and cooling contractors are non-signatories to the union master contract, Zimmermann said.

Although union workers now comprise only about 9 percent of the total greater St. Louis workforce, compared with a peak of about 30 percent decades ago, union contracts set the framework for prevailing wages in the area, White said, and contribute to higher wages for non-union workers.

Numerous national studies have found that workers who are paid the prevailing wage in a given geographical area are more productive than other workers and can lower construction costs, union officials said.

“The job is going to be done quicker and better, and you won’t have to go back and do it again,” White said.

Best pay

Occupations with highest annual salaries locally compared with their national counterparts.

Glaziers 440 local jobs in the field - **\$69,610** local average pay in the field **+57.4%** local average pay compared with national average

Helpers: brickmasons, blockmasons, stonemasons, and tile and marble setters 320 local jobs in the field - **\$42,730** local average pay in the field **+49.7%** local average pay compared with national average

Helpers: Construction trades, all other 130 local jobs in the field - **\$69,610** local average pay in the field **+44.2%** local average pay compared with national average

Construction and related workers, all other 380 local jobs in the field - **\$54,360** local average pay in the field **+41%** local average pay compared with national average

Painters, construction and maintenance 2,430 local jobs in the field - **\$55,220** local average pay in the field **+38.8%** local average pay compared with national average

Worst pay

Occupations with the lowest annual salaries locally compared with their national counterparts.

Social sciences teachers, postsecondary 100 local jobs in the field - **\$51,810** local average pay in the field **-34.2%** local average pay compared with national average

Survey researchers 100 local jobs in the field - **\$35,400** local average pay in the field **-35.3%** local average pay compared with national average

Film and video editors 210 local jobs in the field - **\$48,130** local average pay in the field - **-35.9%** local average pay compared with national average

Massage therapists 480 local jobs in the field - **\$26,540** local average pay in the field -**36.5 %** local average pay compared with national average

Legislators 980 local jobs in the field - **\$25,100** local average pay in the field -**37.9 %** local average pay compared with national average

William Poe is a St. Louis freelance writer.