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## Xcel plant jobs going begging

### Crew to build new Pueblo station still hundreds short

By Gargi Chakrabarty, Rocky Mountain News  
May 23, 2006

Xcel Energy is having trouble finding hundreds of people it needs for construction of a \$1.4 billion power plant in Pueblo, partially because of a dearth of skilled workers and union restrictions on whom it can hire.

The power company needs electricians, plumbers, pipefitters, carpenters, welders and boiler makers. The project will have to hire more than 1,000 workers at peak of construction late next year, about two-thirds of them in a few months.

But fewer than 400 turned up at a job fair in Pueblo last Monday. That compares with the 1,500 who had attended the first such fair in October, 160 of whom went into apprenticeships.

Trade unions spearheading the labor search now are planning a third job fair in the fall.

The apparent shortage is ironic, given that Pueblo has the highest unemployment rate among the state's metro areas.

One reason is Xcel's agreement to use only labor working under union wage rates and conditions. Also, billions of dollars of projects across the state and reconstruction jobs in the hurricane-damaged areas of the Gulf Coast are luring workers away from Pueblo.

"We are seeing demand for construction labor all across the country, especially in the Gulf Coast region," said Patty Silverstein, president of Jefferson County-based Development Research Partners. "Skilled or unskilled labor tends to go to regions that have a plethora of projects where they can easily jump from one to the next project as things are completed."

"Colorado is a less unionized state than other parts of the country, so the labor pool may be even more constrained by that (union) requirement," Silverstein added.

Xcel has hired contractors such as Shaw Stone & Webster, Babcock & Wilcox, Alstom and Mitsubishi Heavy Industries for specific jobs in the project. These contractors will hire the workers. About 100 workers are on site, at which ground was broken in December.

"We are obviously monitoring the situation, but it is not a concern at this point," said Xcel spokesman Mark Stutz. "I am sure (the unions) will expand their search to other regions if they don't find the labor locally."



Pueblo Chieftan © 2000

Xcel Energy needs workers to help complete its \$1.4 billion coal-fired Comanche 3 power plant, which is going up on the existing plant site in Pueblo, above. The project will have to hire more than 1,000 workers at peak of construction late next year, about two-thirds of them in a few months.

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Ray Aguilera, a Pueblo City Council member, said he was surprised and disappointed by last Monday's poor turnout at the job fair. Aguilera manned a booth at the event.

"I am wondering where are all the people who are unemployed and need jobs," Aguilera said. "Why didn't they come to the job fair?"

Last summer, Xcel reached an agreement with labor unions - after pressure from Pueblo's City Council - to show preference for local workers even when a contractor is based out of state. Also, the workers would be paid union wages along with health care and pension benefits.

In exchange, the unions promised there won't be any strikes or lockouts at the plant and that Xcel has the right to manage the project and hire its own contractors.

Neal Hall, business manager for the Colorado Building Construction Trades Council, which spearheaded the negotiation on behalf of labor unions, had called it a "historic agreement."

The trades council, an arm of the AFL-CIO, has 31 local craft unions, which represent 15 national and international unions. The council represents about 30,000 workers in Colorado.

"We will probably have to bring in people from outside, maybe out of state if nobody is available in state," Hall said Monday. "Construction is something not everyone wants to do. It is hard work."

Howard Arnold, a business representative of the United Association of Pipefitters Local Union 208, attributed the looming labor shortage to the aging of the baby boomer generation.

"The oldest baby boomers are beginning to retire, and we will feel the full brunt of it in 10 years," Arnold said. "It is imperative that we replace them with young people."

Arnold noted many illegal immigrant workers are being hired in the construction industry and said he supports their presence so long they are paid the going wage rate and health benefits as union workers.

Pueblo Councilman Aguilera blamed the lack of skill in younger people, and to some extent the discouragement among those who have been unemployed for long periods, for the poor response at the job fair.

For instance, Aguilera said, young people are encouraged to go to schools and colleges for higher academic degrees but few are advised to attend trade schools to become plumbers or pipefitters.

"It is easier to find a brain surgeon than to get an electrician to come to your home," Aguilera said. "It is a complicated situation."

## Xcel's coal-fired power plant

- Where: Pueblo
- Cost: \$1.4 billion
- Capacity: 750 megawatts
- Needed: 1,000 workers at the peak of construction
- Start of operation: 2009
- Savings: \$500 million to \$1.4 billion over the life of the plant, typically 30 years.
- For information about construction jobs building Comanche 3, contact the Colorado Building and Construction Trades Council at 303-936-3301.

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