

# What Works/Boosting clothing workers

Garment Industry Development Corp. / by Bruce Herman & Linda Dworak

America's unions are taking the lead in launching a host of what are called High Road Partnerships that build alliances with employers and their communities. Examples include the San Francisco Hotels Partnership, the Las Vegas Culinary Workers Training Center, and the Michigan-based Labor Management Council for Economic Renewal. But one of the most successful and oldest is the New York-based Garment Industry Development Corporation (GIDC).

GIDC was the outgrowth of concerns over the decline of the New York apparel-making business, which had historically provided a point of entry into the formal labor market for new immigrant communities. With 4,000 manufacturers and contractors and 80,000 workers, New York remains a world fashion capital, generating \$14 billion annually for the city. Yet for years, the city's apparel industry and its employees have faced significant challenges due to competition from low-wage production overseas. In 1984, UNITE (the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees) took the lead in convening government, industry, and labor leaders to address the problems of factory closures, job losses, and the growing presence of sweatshops. As a result, GIDC was created to strengthen New York's clothes makers with the slogan "keep jobs in fashion."

Now in its sixteenth year of operation, GIDC's sectoral strategy is designed to contribute value-added programs and services that maximize the competitiveness of New York City apparel manufacturers and simultaneously retain, grow, and improve jobs. This strategy combines education and training with technology diffusion and market development, providing comprehensive support to the city's fashion industry.

GIDC's earliest efforts focused on providing real estate assistance to lower

Manhattan or Chinatown-based sportswear industries. Since that time, GIDC has established itself as a multiservice organization providing an array of programs and services that help New York's apparel industry compete in the global economy.

GIDC provides training and education programs to increase the apparel industry's competitiveness and to improve the earnings potential of its workers. Training is provided to

both workers and managers in classrooms as well as on the job. On-site, employer-specific extension services assist New York apparel firms to adopt modern technologies and production methods and to develop high performance work organizations to compete more effectively in the global marketplace. Additionally, GIDC's market development programs expand the customer base for domestic apparel manufacturers and contractors by facilitating new business relationships, promoting exports, and enhancing the image of New York's apparel industry in the United States and abroad.

GIDC's major accomplishments include:

- training approximately 1,000 garment workers and management personnel annually;
- creating the Garment Industry Training Center with state-of-the-art industrial sewing equipment located at the High School of Fashion Industries;
- establishing a Training and Technology Extension Service;
- creating JobNet, a job identification and referral service;
- acting as a conduit to existing govern-



**NEW TRAINING:** New York is still a magnet for immigrants, many of whom begin working as garment workers. GIDC has trained more than 1,000 workers in modern techniques, improving skills and earnings.

ment assistance programs to upgrade technology and improve productivity;

- generating over \$35 million in new international business through the Fashion Exports/New York and New York Fashion International programs;
- completing an extensive study of the child care needs of apparel industry workers;
- launching domestic market development initiatives — Quick Response, the Sourcing Center, and the Made-in-New-York program;
- opening the Fashion Industry Modernization Center, a technology and training center located in the heart of Chinatown.

In 1998, the AFL-CIO created the Working for America Institute to document and foster the High Road Partnerships. For more information, contact the Institute at 815 16th St. NW, Washington, D.C., 20006 (tel. 202-638-3912, fax 202-783-6536). Web site: [www.workingforamerica.org](http://www.workingforamerica.org).

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"You need all of the players to be at the table."  
—Amy Dean

# Back to the Future

Silicon Valley labor leader Amy Dean argues that mobile, information Age workers need an updated version of the craft guild.

*Interview by Kerry Tremain*

**S**ilicon Valley, one of the cut-throat capitals of the economic universe, might seem an unlikely environment for the re-emergence of a powerful union movement. Yet that is precisely what has happened under the leadership of an innovative AFL-CIO organizer named Amy Dean. Dean, 36, heads the South Bay Central Labor Council which represents more than 110,000 employees in and around San Jose, Calif.

Dean believes the labor movement can reinvent itself for the New Economy by remembering its roots in craft guilds and hiring halls, when workers were often freelance agents rather than attached to one firm for life. She wants labor to broker training programs and portable benefits for a mobile, educated workforce; she also wants unions, like professional associations, to be easier to join.

In Silicon Valley, Dean has initiated training programs with a local junior college and started a policy research arm of the council, whose reports on wage trends have garnered wide attention. In addition, she has created a union-sponsored temp agency that offers training, higher wages, and portable benefits to the workers it represents. Dean, who serves as a member of the PPI's Technology & New Economy Project, spoke to BLUEPRINT recently about her vision for new labor.

**BLUEPRINT: What are three key ways in which you would urge union leaders to redefine labor's role in the New Economy?**

**Dean:** The first is to organize. Develop a strategic plan that analyzes the direction of your industry and employment sector, then to shift resources into organizing. Our AFL-CIO president John Sweeney has called for unions to commit at least 30 percent of their resources to organizing. Those resources must be linked to a strategic plan with the goal of building union membership density in the sector.

In health care, for example, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) recognized that the emphasis is to move support services into people's homes. The HMOs are pressuring hospitals to get people in and out quickly. SEIU anticipated that trend and committed resources to organizing the new sector, home health care workers.

The second is to be looking at different kinds of benefit plans. People no longer stay in the same craft or occupation over a lifetime. We need to have portability as an option for our health plans and our pension plans so that people can remain connected to the industry or occupation even as they move from employer to employer.

The third thing I would suggest is that unions need to be an independent mechanism for employee voice. People want to have a say in the way their work is performed and a voice in the strategic direction of the enterprise or the occupation. National polling done by the national AFL-

CIO confirms this. We have to think more broadly about the collective interests of people beyond just simply wages and hours and working conditions.

To add a fourth point, labor can coordinate all of the workforce development and training resources within a regional economy and within a particular occupation or industry sector. For industry, there is increasingly a disincentive to invest in a company's workforce given that median job tenure is so short. In California it's three years. Even for companies like Cisco, their biggest problem in growing their market is having enough trained people. Most companies only think about training for the skill set that is immediately necessary. We need an institution that thinks both in terms of the immediate needs of the employer as well as the long-term needs of the employee.

**Are there unions that have started to play that role?**

Here in our own valley the Plumber's Union partners with their employer association and plays an active, strategic role in the training direction. We have another craft union that is just a mile down from the Plumber's Union, and they simply came to the table and never tried to think strategically about the skill sets that were necessary for their people over time. They allowed industry to continue to specialize their training. And now, twenty years later, they don't have any of the kinds of workers industry needs, whereas the plumbers now have almost 100 percent full employment.