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NEW WORKPLACE PARTNERSHIP NEEDED FOR SKILLS THAT KEEP AMERICAN JOBS

Labor, business and policy experts call for bottom-up reform, substantial new funding and an emphasis on incumbent workers in workforce development system

Washington, D.C., April 16, 2004 – A Task Force on Workforce Development sponsored by The Albert Shanker Institute and The New Economy Information Service has issued a report that calls for far-reaching changes in the way our country manages its workforce skills and training efforts. The group argues that the United States needs to do far more to help those who have jobs keep them as technological change and global competition buffet our labor markets.

The report, ***Learning Partnerships: Strengthening American Jobs in the Global Economy***, is the result of a year-long, in-depth study in the U.S. and the United Kingdom that brings labor, business and policy leaders together to support a common agenda. The group urges adding \$3 billion to the funding of the Workforce Investment Act to enable incumbent workers to retrain for changing jobs and emerging industries. Better skilled employees can help employers here in America in transforming more of our enterprises, big and small, into innovative and competitive workplaces.

“Labor must now consider its traditional role in training and credentialing workers as one of the major missions of the modern labor movement.” said Morton Bahr, President of the Communication Workers of America and Co-Chair of the Task Force.

To provide workers with the improved skills that increased competition requires, the Task Force proposes establishing “**bottom-up partnerships**” that bring together government agencies, educators, labor leaders and employers for a national campaign on a scale similar to the historic undertakings that modernized American agriculture and built our public education system. Partnerships should be established at many levels to analyze job opportunities and workforce needs, and to develop appropriate learning services.

The report acknowledges various proposals that have been made to improve workforce skills, but argues that "political leadership on all sides has yet to give adequate attention to this challenge, or what must be done to address it." It notes that those with very different views on tax, trade and labor policy can nevertheless agree on the need for better skills and training -- but adequate strategies for providing this have not yet been developed.

The report notes that although the trend towards globalization and "off-shoring" -sending work to countries where wages are lower - presents American workers with real challenges, it should also be recognized that new job opportunities are emerging here at home for those with certain skills and professional capabilities. These opportunities may grow as the large labor force cohort from the "baby boom" generation moves into retirement. Helping workers to identify new opportunities and to acquire skills that match them not only benefits individuals, it also strengthens our economy in ways that will enable us to address our healthcare, education, retirement and national security needs.

The report calls for actively engaging workers in efforts to raise their own workforce skills. In this the Task Force proposal is modeled after the successful "**learning representatives**" program now being implemented in Great Britain. Learning representatives help employees act for themselves by seeking advice from someone on site who has their confidence and understands their needs, as well as those of employers. Often, current programs are not rooted in the workplace. Workers must travel to training sites, and those who design and manage programs are disconnected from trainees and their particular job needs. Programs the Task Force envisions would bring together all the essential players: the employer, the educational provider, the employee, employee advisors and community leaders. These "learning partnerships" would build programs from the "bottom up" after diagnosing employment demands and worker needs.

The report also calls on educators - especially those in community colleges - to become more closely involved with the learning needs of the workplace. The Task Force found that adult workers are often reluctant to admit educational deficiencies, to make long commutes to training sites, or to enroll in two or four year degree programs. Government education assistance also overlooks the needs of adult learners and should be revamped if we are to produce the skilled workers who can keep our economy on the leading edge.

The report points out that our public workforce development programs, which are focussed on those who have lost jobs or face special difficulties in the labor market, do little to help us keep people at work. Because both business and labor unions are most involved with those currently employed, they therefore have less incentive to participate and contribute in training and skills development activities.

"While Task Force members may disagree on some policy prescriptions, this study contains a refreshingly centrist and constructive set of proposals representing a consensus view on potentially divisive issues," says Task Force member Susan Traiman of the Business Roundtable.

The Albert Shanker Institute, one sponsor of the Task Force, is named in honor of the late president of the American Federation of Teachers. It is a nonprofit organization dedicated to generating ideas, fostering exchanges, and promoting constructive policy proposals in three areas—children's education, unions as advocates for quality, and freedom of association in the public life of democracies. The New Economy Information Service provides information and encourages dialogue on the impact that globalization and technological change has on democracy here and abroad.