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Bioscience offers jobs of the future

By William A. Burga

The Ohio job market continues to stagnate and state unemployment remains too high. Fortunately, there's a way to revive our economy and create the long-lasting, well-paying jobs that Buckeyes crave. But it requires cooperation between politicians, labor groups and business.

Typically, union officials and industry leaders assume they have to be at odds with one another. They don't. I should know - I served as president of the Ohio AFL-CIO for 14 years before stepping down in 2007. And during my tenure, I learned that one industry in particular - biopharmaceutical research and manufacturing - holds the most hope for creating the jobs of the future in Ohio.

Our state is already a leader in this industry, home to nearly 800 bioscience companies. Bioscience firms in Ohio generate \$15 billion in annual state economic output. Two firms in the Fortune 500 - Cardinal Health and Procter & Gamble - are headquartered here.

Bioscience projects don't just create jobs for trained researchers. Building and running a lab requires construction workers, engineers, sanitation crews, groundskeepers and many others. Many of these folks are in unions.

Over the last decade, the Ohio bioscience sector added over 8,400 jobs and 1,500 of those new paychecks were generated between 2007 and 2008, when the national labor market was collapsing.

Today, bioscience companies are responsible for about 92,000 Ohio jobs. And the average salary for an industry employee is around \$70,000 - a figure that includes all occupations in the industry, not just researchers and top managers. That compensation has been growing - and the total state bioscience payroll now sits at \$3.9 billion.

Indeed, the local bioscience sector has proven particularly robust during these

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hard times. In recent years, 355 new firms started up in Ohio, including 81 in 2008 alone. Many of these companies relocated from other states with less friendly regulatory environments, like California, Florida and New York.

Ohio is also a top 10 state for venture capital funding for bioscience. Total investments jumped from \$3.2 to \$10.3 million in 10 years.

With more than \$2.5 billion in funding, Ohio is establishing a leadership role in the bioscience industry, and we must continue this support. State and federal officials need to increase public funding for bioscience research and training.

In this regard, we're already moving in the right direction - the U.S. Department of Labor recently awarded a \$5 million grant to BioOhio, for a three-year program to retrain 660 displaced or underemployed manufacturing workers and set them up with jobs in bioscience companies. BioOhio is also providing advanced training to workers so they can move to higher level jobs and open up entry-level employment.

Officials must also work to improve science and math education in school. If education quality doesn't improve, there won't be enough American scientists to staff bioscience work in the future, and firms will end up relocating elsewhere.

Outside government, union leaders must work with biopharmaceutical companies to grow local research operations. This move would create strong jobs that will last through today's economic upheaval, and bring down unemployment.

Over the span of my career, I saw what happened -- and the incredible hardships that families endured -- when plants closed and industries left our state. But I also came to recognize the value in supporting those industries that will create jobs and spur growth well into the future. In Ohio, that's bioscience.

William A. Burga was president of the Ohio AFL-CIO for 14 years before retiring in 2007.