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No Depression: Pharmaceutical-Labor Alliance Flourishes

By Robert Struckman

"I certainly admit going in with an attitude of let's-see-what-this-is-about," Johnson & Johnson Vice President Donald Bohn says about cooperating with labor unions. "It turns out we have a lot more in common than you might think."

And that's why, about four years ago, Johnson & Johnson joined the Pharmaceutical Industry Labor-Management Association ([PILMA](#)), a growing coalition of pharmaceutical industry giants and the major building trades unions. Its goal is to foster good jobs in the domestic pharmaceutical industry while increasing access to affordable medicines.

Such cooperation between workers and the industries that employ them is something of an anomaly in an era of increasingly balkanized politics.

One staple of PILMA's program—along with conferences and other get-togethers—is to provide tours of union training facilities, which allow industry officials to see firsthand the skill levels and training union workers bring to the specialized construction needs of the biotechnology industry.

Last year, Sheet Metal Workers ([SMWIA](#)) hosted a delegation to tour its training facility in Everett, Wash. The Seattle-area apprentice program runs five years and requires as much as 1,500 hours of classroom time and 9,000 hours of on-the-job training. The apprentices learn commercial and residential HVAC, architectural and production sheet metal work, maintenance and test-and-balance—a process where independent workers test a newly installed system and then calibrate it so it's perfect.

"Our members are committed to the craft. It's not a job. It's a career," says Eric Martinson, business manager of SMWIA Local 66, which runs the Everett training center. "If you're putting in a fume hood in a laboratory, you're not just installing it and hoping that it works."

As the tour delved into the nitty-gritty, the workers and the company representatives got downright geeky about the work they do. They talked fume hoods and evacuation systems, return systems and laboratories, air volume and flow, gas systems and all manner of duct work.

This is stuff the workers know intimately because they fabricate, install, test and maintain all of these systems—and their knowledge complements that of the scientists, researchers and other industry representatives.

"I don't think we can say this enough. America's building trades unions invest upward of \$1 billion a year in training and developing the safest, most highly trained and productive workers found anywhere in the world," says Sean McGarvey, president of the AFL-CIO Building and Construction Trades Department.

That investment has currency with pharmaceutical company leaders. In New Jersey, it has become common for pharmaceutical companies to sign 15-year maintenance contracts to ensure that systems will be maintained by experienced and skilled union workers.

"Over time, we've seen more and more companies follow the natural inclination to rely on union contractors for a steady stream of well-educated, informed workers," PILMA director Tim Dickson says. Some companies, like Eli Lilly, are bringing pharmaceutical productions back to the United States from overseas.

As for Bohn, it didn't take him long to become a believer in the coalition.

"Our commitment is to the safety and quality of the products that we sell," Bohn says. "We need companies with strong reputations and a qualified workforce. When you pay for quality, the investment comes back to you."

