

2000
2000

& Beyond

Making

QUICK QUIZ: WHAT DO Lucent, General Motors and Microsoft make? Computer chips? Trucks? Software? Wrong. The answer is money.

Understand that, and you can understand what is up with manufacturing these days. The fact is that making things just isn't the focus of the North American economy. "Manufacturing isn't cool anymore," says IBEW Manufacturing Department Director Robert Stander. "The movement of money and information is the basis of the so-called 'new economy.'"

Several years ago, talk of the service economy conjured up visions of burger flippers and dry cleaning clerks. Nowadays, however, companies are expanding that definition, concentrating on marketing, finance, distribution and design—almost everything except actually making the product. Instead, the unglamorous work of producing and assembling things goes to specialty or "contract" manufacturers, or plants located in Mexico, Asia or elsewhere overseas.

There's a reason for this. The hot economy fueled by technology and e-commerce has created a new set of expectations in the corporate community. Companies that slashed payrolls were rewarded with high stock prices in the early to mid-1990s, and today a company need only slap the prefix "e" onto any venture to attract an almost insane influx of capital. The 'virtual company' is in, and the old-line, solid companies that actually invested in research and development, long-term marketing strategy and modern production facilities are undesirable or even "boring." You were supposed to make money, not products.

Then in the spring of

Orlando Local 2000 members working in a clean room.

MANUFACTURING HAS FELT THE FULL FORCE OF ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING IN NORTH AMERICA. THE GROUND CONTINUES TO SHIFT BELOW THE FEET OF WORKERS TRYING TO SHAPE THEIR OWN DESTINY.

Change

2000, technology stocks suddenly took wild swings in value. It is too early to tell what effect this turmoil will have on the economy. Perhaps it will prompt investors to renew their love for the old-fashioned, steady companies. Maybe it is just a speed bump on the road to a new economy.

Either way, workers in traditional industries must continue on a new path. IBEW International President J. J. Barry has long emphasized the three elements of future success, comparing them to a tripod. "As trade union men and women," he said, "our tripod consists of organizing, training and collective bargaining. Each is important, each is interconnected and each is dependent on the other."

International Secretary-Treasurer Edwin D. Hill brought that point home at this year's Manufacturing Conference. "Circumstances change. Prosperity ebbs and flows. Today's success story might be tomorrow's failure. But the need to organize and fight for what is ours—be it fair wages or a skills training program—remains constant," he said. "We lift our vision to see new horizons. But shoring our base and keeping the IBEW strong in every arena are also important parts of building for the future."

For years, the IBEW has emphasized that highly technical manufacturing will still be in demand. The union has argued that skilled workers stand a far better chance of keeping their jobs, or moving to new and/or better jobs, than those who have little access to training opportunities. Growth in high-tech employment has helped keep the IBEW's numbers in manufacturing steady, as new jobs replace those in more traditional industries that have gone south. (See page 16).

The shift in corporate strategy also presents organizing challenges for labor. The expanding number of contract manufacturers who make products for a range of companies means that jobs lost at some companies do not disappear; they shift to a new place and employer (See page 15). The IBEW and other unions must follow this work before non-unionism takes root in this new industrial segment.

The challenge of the 21st century for the IBEW and all of organized labor is to spread the benefits of collective bargaining throughout the remaining industrial base of North America. Only by organiz-



Glass lamp lens being heated during the 'fuse seal' process. This work is performed by members of Local 1627, Lexington, Kentucky.

ing workers who move to nonunion facilities and bringing them under the security of a collective bargaining agreement do unions have the ghost of a chance to help these workers reap the rewards of their labor. And one of the most valuable benefits for which labor can bargain is training in order that workers can acquire the knowledge they need to enhance their employment prospects.

The fight to preserve good industrial jobs in the United States and Canada goes on. The following pages are a report on the battle. 

(Continued on next page)