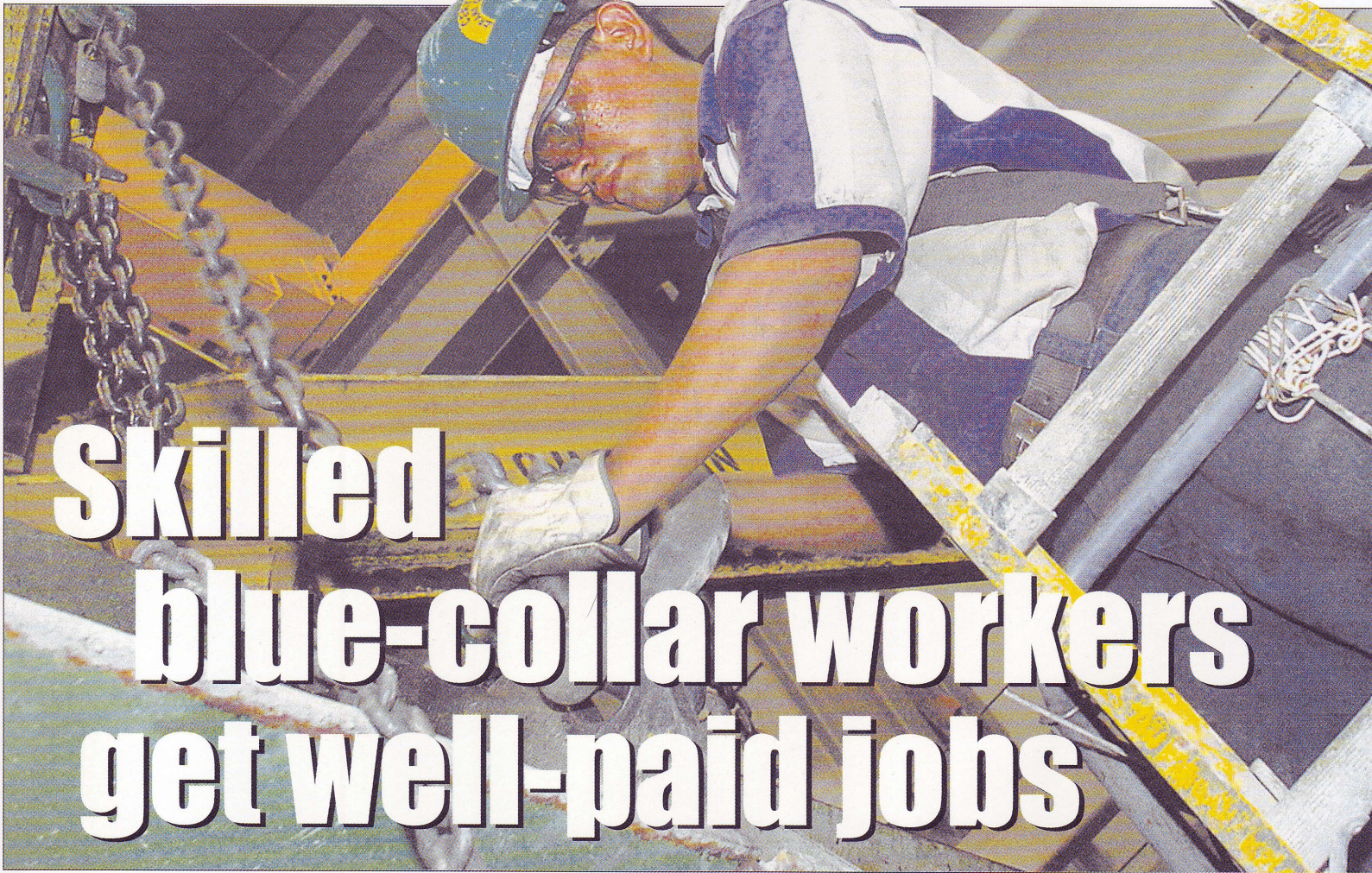




Skilled blue-collar workers get well-paid jobs

Photo by Joe Gayle

Crane operator Fulvio Perez of Link Staffing at work. Contrary to popular opinion, most blue-collar jobs pay well and require education and intelligence to do.

By **LISA RICHARDS**
Employment Correspondent

Though a number of Houston employers continue to be cautious about creating new jobs, they do offer opportunities for blue-collar workers who are willing to accept temporary assignments.

Daniel Gibbs, vice president of Skilled Craftsmen of Texas Inc., said he has been receiving numerous requests for machinists and maintenance mechanics.

His Houston-based agency helps clients in the manufacturing and petrochemical sectors find temporary, blue-collar workers.

The machinist positions call for cutting metal or plastic parts using equipment such as lathes, mills and drill presses.

The machinists either operate the machines manually or by using computerized numerical controls.

In addition to cutting the metal or plastic, machinists are responsible for measuring the results to make sure the parts they're making comply with their blueprints.

"A lot of people think the blue collar industry is for people who didn't finish

school or get much of an education," Gibbs said.

But machinist positions require a good grasp of mathematics and an eye for detail.

"You've got to be intelligent to do this," Gibbs said.

Most of these positions pay \$12 to \$13 at the entry level and progress to \$21 to \$25 per hour for the more experienced.

Though some companies are willing to train machinists, most prefer trained or experienced workers, Gibbs said. Basic programs are available through the San Jacinto College District and Houston Community College System. There, students can learn how to read blueprints, measure products and operate machines.

Those who become maintenance mechanics, on the other hand, tend to do their learning on the job. These workers repair manufacturing machinery along with electrical systems, hydraulic systems and warehouse equipment.

"A lot of times you start as an assembler, gain experience and move into these jobs," Gibbs said. He also has met a number of maintenance workers who have gained their skills in the military.

The maintenance positions usually pay

\$14 to \$18 an hour, Gibbs said.

Karen Pitts, co-chief executive officer for Link Staffing, said the clients her firm serves have been asking for housekeeping, maintenance and warehouse workers.

"There are many jobs where people come in with basic skills, and the employer will teach them to work their way," Pitts said. "We can always use bilingual workers, and some clients will use non-English-speaking workers."

Link Staffing also helps clients find skilled workers. In this area, Pitts has been seeing demand for machinists, truck drivers and electricians.

Staffing services can be an effective way to find skilled, semi-skilled and general labor job opportunities, Sabrina Gay, a senior staffing specialist with Corestaff Services said. She suggests working with a temporary agency to find short and longer-term assignments.

"A lot of people are skittish at first about going to temporary services, but the market is moving toward that," Gay said.

Sally DeVito works with Gay at Corestaff as a vice president in marketing and communications.

"I think an advantage is that temporary agencies give you the opportunity to work

at a variety of client sites and get experience," DeVito said.

Some services, including Corestaff, help workers become more marketable by offering training for manufacturing and clerical positions, she said.

They also can advise workers on résumés, dress and interview techniques, and they can provide insight on a company's culture.

"We have a coverage and reach and process," DeVito said. "A new job seeker may not have all of those services available."

DeVito also encourages job seekers to turn to the Internet for help.

Job coaching

"There are more blue-collar positions being posted on the major job boards," she said.

Corestaff's site, employmentzone.org, also offers information on résumé and dress code along with links to other sources of information and job coaching.

"There is definitely information out there for all job seekers, not just those looking at a high end job," DeVito said.