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The Promise of Science

Pennsylvania must support the biosciences to create cures and jobs

BY WILLIAM GEORGE, JUNE 24, 2010

For the past 20 years, I headed the Pennsylvania AFL-CIO, retiring at the end of May. And I've been a union member for 50 years, so I've witnessed the incredible hardship that accompanied the decline of our state's most cherished industries, particularly steel.

But I've also seen how far the labor movement has come and how much we've accomplished. And I've come to recognize the value in supporting those industries that generate jobs and spur economic growth.

For the sake of Pennsylvania's labor force, it's important that our political leaders do the same. And an important industry to support is life sciences. By securing our state's bioscience sector, we can ensure that Pennsylvanians have opportunities for gainful, secure employment well into the future.

Already, Pennsylvania is home to more than 1,700 bioscience businesses. These companies don't just employ trained scientists; they also provide jobs for a wide range of professionals, many of whom are in unions -- from the construction workers and engineers who build the facilities to the sanitation workers, groundskeepers and administrative professionals who keep the plants running.

In fact, the life sciences sector is responsible for nearly 340,000 high-paying jobs, both directly and indirectly, throughout the state.

Pennsylvania's bioscience sector also has distinguished itself as one of the most innovative in the country. Our state ranks fourth in the

nation when it comes to bioscience-related patents. It's exciting to think that, in the coming years, Pennsylvania's science community could create cures for illnesses such as cancer, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and multiple sclerosis.

We can't, however, take the success of the life sciences industry for granted. We need to make sure that bioscience firms continue to find a home here in Pennsylvania over the long term.

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Incentives need to be put in place to motivate existing bioscience firms to stay or locate in Pennsylvania and to encourage start-up companies to grow here. Pennsylvania needs to be a place where creativity is fostered and where innovative researchers can be rewarded for their contributions to medical science.

We also need to prepare for the future by promoting science education in our schools. When today's schoolchildren enter the workforce, they must be equipped with the tools they need to compete in the 21st century economy.

Finally, there's the issue of public funding. Over the past five years, federal funding for life sciences research has gone down, even as private bioscience firms have increased their R&D spending dra-

matically. Both the state and federal governments need to help ensure that the life sciences sector has the resources needed to provide the cures and jobs of the future.

Luckily, Pennsylvania leaders like Sen. Bob Casey have consistently stood up for legislation that provides incentives for continued creativity in the life sciences. Leadership like his makes me optimistic that Pennsylvania can remain a bastion of high-paying union jobs, economic growth and innovation.

For more than a century, Pennsylvania's unions took tremendous pride in helping construct the world we now live in. Throughout my career, I saw many elected officials courageously lead our state into a post-steel economy. Unfortunately, only a few succeeded. By supporting the life sciences industry, we can make sure that the resourcefulness and hard work of Pennsylvanians will drive the coming bioscience revolution, just as it drove the industrial revolution.

Looking back on my career, I am proud of how much the labor movement has accomplished in my lifetime. I'm also more confident than ever that, with proper leadership and the help of growing industries like bioscience, our state's labor force has every reason to expect a bright, prosperous future.

William George, president emeritus of the Pennsylvania AFL-CIO, plans to remain highly active in union causes (billygeorge@live.com).