

# 10,000 apply for 90 factory jobs

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In the latest sign of weakness in Louisville-area employment, about 10,000 people applied over three days for 90 jobs building washing machines at General Electric for about \$27,000 per year and hefty benefits.

The jobs dangle medical, eye care, prescription and dental benefit packages, as well as pension, disability, tuition assistance and more, said GE spokeswoman Kim Freeman. And despite the recession, no union workers have been laid off from Appliance Park since the company negotiated lower wages with workers in 2005.

"There are no jobs out there paying these kinds of wages that also offer these kind of benefits," said Jerry Carney, president of IUE-CWA Local 761 at Appliance Park.

Just four years ago, the same jobs paid \$19 per hour. But that was before Local 761 approved wage cuts for new workers aimed at preventing the closure of Appliance Park.

"People still value these jobs," Freeman said.

With the Jefferson County unemployment rate at 10.6 percent in August and more than 38,000 unemployed people looking for work, the opportunity for moderate pay and health care was an attractive lure.

"In this recession, there are lot of people who are just about to run out of unemployment benefits," said Richard Hurd, a labor relations professor at Cornell University. The national average of time unemployment benefits collected now stands at 26 weeks, Indiana University Southeast Professor of Business Uric Dufrene said.

That's about a third of the maximum that can currently be collected.

Larissa Roos, 38, never worked in a factory, but was one of the thousands who bid on jobs assembling appliances.

Until she was laid off from Bank of America in February, Roos said she made \$18 per hour fielding calls, often from irritated merchants, about credit card glitches. Roos took that job just out of high school. But severance payments end this month, and Roos said she is looking everywhere to try to replace the income.

"I need something so I can live day to day. The job market is horrible," Roos said Thursday, adding the family relies on her husband's job as a printer to pay the mortgage on their Fern Creek home as well as utility, fuel and other bills.

With 10,000 vying for GE line jobs, "I am sure my application won't even get looked at," she added.

The rush of applicants came as no surprise to Carney, who noted that another recent GE advertisement for 13 maintenance workers, who are paid a union skilled trades rate of \$23 hourly, drew 700 job seekers.

Carney credited GE's reputation for union job security and blue chip benefits as a powerful lure.

GE announced the new jobs last week and started accepting applications through a website Monday. Wednesday was the deadline. The jobs are being added to a new second shift early next month to assemble Energy Star washing machines in Building 1 at the historic Louisville complex.

Roughly 80 percent of applicants report factory experience, Freeman said. That is not surprising, given the recession so far has slashed 8,000 manufacturing jobs from the region's economy, Dufrene said.

"There is an abundance of potential employees with manufacturing-related skills," Dufrene said.

The rough profile of applicants, most of them former factory workers, suggests many lack sufficient education to apply for more than minimum wage jobs in the current job market.

Half lacked a high school diploma. Just 5 percent of the applicants said they had a bachelor's degree or higher. and

GE employs roughly 2,100 hourly and 2,000 white collar workers at Appliance Park. Now, about 440 workers labor on the first shift making washing machines in Building 1.

Applicant Shane Hopkins, 48, hopes his factory experience provides an edge.

Until mid-August, he said he maintained presses at a plastics factory. Now, Hopkins said he picks up occasional work as a flooring contractor for a cousin.

He still pays \$300 per month to keep health care benefits for himself and his wife, an independent contractor for a Ford Motor Co. parts supplier at the Louisville Assembly Plant. Hopkins anticipates she'll be out of work next year, when the plant closes for retooling.

A year from now, "her job ain't going to be there," Hopkins said. "I am thinking seriously about going to McDonalds, just for the benefits if nothing else."

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