Readers in Michigan: We Need More Skills, Not More Jobs

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A common experience after writing an article is that once it’s published, people come out of the woodwork to tell you things you wish you had known. It doesn’t matter that you spent weeks reporting in the first place. Usually these readers reach a reporter by email or in the online comments. But the other day I had the rare and rewarding experience of meeting them in person, at a forum The Times organized in Jackson, Mich., to follow up on a profile I wrote of a young factory owner there. I came away wishing I’d interviewed many of the Jackson residents who turned out. It’s not that I would have changed the thrust of my story. But the extra voices added richness and depth.

My original article, published on Labor Day, was a lengthy portrait of an entrepreneur, Anita­ Maria Quillen, 35, who is struggling to expand her business and create jobs in a Midwest state that unexpectedly voted for Donald J. Trump after he promised a manufacturing renaissance.

I made four or five visits to Ms. Quillen’s company, Diversified Engineering & Plastics, which produces injection­ molded plastic parts for the automobile industry, during May and June. “I was like, O.K., is he ever going to be leaving?” she quipped to the nearly 100 community members who turned out for the forum on Nov. 28.

The focus was jobs and the manufacturing economy, and we were joined onstage by Mindy Bradish ­Orta, president of the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce, and Bill Rayl, president of the Jackson Area Manufacturers Association. The audience included officials from the city, the school district, local companies and others passionate about seeing Jackson County (pop. 160,000) thrive.

To some, the community no longer hummed as it once had when Goodyear tire employed 1,500 there, with union wages, at a now ­defunct factory. “The panacea that it’s going to be 1967 again is not going to happen,” one audience member lamented. “Those jobs are gone.” Both Ms. Bradish­ Orta and Mr. Rayl said Jackson’s employers had to compete with the lure of the bright lights from cities like Detroit and Ann Arbor. Ms. Bradish­Orta called it a “perception problem” and praised her county’s abundant lakes and golf courses.

I cited statistics showing there were thousands fewer manufacturing jobs these days in Jackson, long a blue ­collar hub, than there were in 2000. What was the problem? Ms. Bradish­ Orta and Mr. Rayl said the local economy wasn’t at fault. “Jackson doesn’t have a job­ creation problem,” Ms. Bradish ­Orta said. “We have a job­ filling problem.” There were more than 3,000 open jobs in the county in the first quarter of 2017, she noted.

Ms. Quillen and the others said that companies couldn’t find workers qualified to fill advanced manufacturing jobs, and that many people lacked good work habits. “We’ve got an entire generation of people that don’t have the work ethic, haven’t had it instilled in them by parents and society,” said Mr. Rayl, whose group trains young people for manufacturing careers.

A couple of audience members who advise students pointed out that 37 percent of Jackson high school graduates do not go to college, but the option of working in manufacturing hasn’t always been evident to them, especially those raised in front of digital screens. “Kids haven’t played in their backyards and made birdhouses and forts; they don’t know they like to work with their hands,” said Cari Bushinski, the curriculum director for a local school district.

“It’s not like it was when we were young.” Many of Jackson County’s challenges are structural, just as in other Midwest industrial regions. In recent years, for the first time in decades, manufacturing jobs began returning to the United States, but they require higher skills because they involve assisting robots on the assembly line.

Unemployment in Jackson is low. Wages, however, are not growing. Median household income is actually 11 percent lower than in 2005. Daveda Quinn, a city employee whose job in environmental quality brings her into factories, said she sees people every day walking to work along a busy road because they do not have cars and there are no city buses. Ms. Quillen joined in. “We have a significant amount of employees that walk or ride their bikes,” she said.

A few online comments on the original article criticized Ms. Quillen for not paying workers well enough to make a decent. Her pay scale, starting at around $10 an hour, reflects the local economy, she said, and there are opportunities to earn considerably more. “Anyone can walk in right now to D.E.P. and take a job that starts at $10.50 and work up to making $25 an hour in less than four years if they choose to,” she said. “They don’t need a college education. They need to have grit.”

My reporting had been prompted by the political climate — let’s look at a “job creator” in a state that voted for President Trump — but it became less about the economy as a whole and essentially apolitical once I learned of the specific challenges Ms. Quillen faces in her business, which is a cog in the global automotive industry, where sales growth is slowing.

Six months later, I was interested in what impact the Republican tax bill moving through Congress would have on her hiring and wages. The president promised that deep cuts in corporate taxes would be “rocket fuel” for the economy. Will you invest in your plant and create more jobs if you receive a tax windfall? I asked Ms. Quillen. Her answer was revealing: “There’s no need to hire more people unless you’re adding more sales.” Instead, she said, she would “invest in the employees we have,” by offering more skills training and reducing their health insurance costs. “By giving them more skills, you can justify paying them more. It’s a full circle.” To listen to an audio recording of the Nov. 28 Jackson, Mich., panel