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# Roving Tradesmen Stuck in Vegas

By ALEXANDRA BERZON

LAS VEGAS -- Over the past 25 years, Larry Valdez has worked as an electrician in Grand Junction, Colo.; Duluth, Minn.; Salem, Ore.; and more than a dozen other places.

A skilled tradesman with a union card, he could always hop from one job to the next, building a mall, a power plant or a microchip factory. Five years ago, he landed in Las Vegas as developers were breaking ground on a series of lavish hotels and casinos on the Strip.

Thousands of carpenters, ironworkers, electricians, pipefitters and other tradesmen were lured here by the concrete and steel rising from the desert -- and the promise of steady work and higher pay. Known in the trade as "travelers" or "boomers," they have long served as a sort of a roving labor pool, providing the skilled manpower needed to get big projects off the ground -- no matter where they popped up.

Now, many of those Las Vegas construction projects have been mothballed or are nearing completion. Usually, Mr. Valdez, 52 years old, would be striking out for the next job by now. Instead, he has been out of work since April, with no prospects, even as construction cranes continue to dot the skyline. "All that work is just sitting there," Mr. Valdez said. "You can see it right across the fence before your eyes. You just can't get to it."

The economic downturn has hit construction harder than most other industries. The unemployment rate for construction workers was 16.5% in August, double the rate a year earlier and the highest of any industry. The industry shed nearly a million jobs in the past year, a fifth of all jobs lost, as development slowed nationwide.

In Las Vegas, there were 21,000 fewer construction jobs in August than a year earlier -- a 20% drop. It is a sharp turnaround for a city where developers had planned more than \$55 billion of condo, hotel and casino projects. The centerpiece is MGM Mirage's \$8.5 billion City Center resort and casino, which employs about 10,000 construction workers.

Steve Holloway, executive vice president of the Las Vegas Associated General Contractors chapter, said about 15,000 union travelers came to Las Vegas during the boom. "Everyone was saying, 'Jesus, are there enough workers to do all this work?'" recalls Marc Furman, president of the Southwest Regional Council of Carpenters. That changed in August 2008 when Boyd Gaming Corp. halted its \$4 billion Echelon project on the Strip. "Now it's like musical chairs. Everyone got to Vegas and is just sitting here," he said.

Many travelers have moved back to their hometowns or other cities as work here slowed, emptying out bars like the

Hard Hat Lounge. But union officials say a contingent has stuck around, either out of hope that work will pick up, or because they have nowhere else to go. Mr. Valdez came here in 2004. "I never did plan on staying home," says Mr. Valdez, who is from Colorado. "I got into the trade to see the United States."

He soon found work setting up conventions and, later, got high-paying jobs on power plants and multibillion-dollar casino projects. Last spring, Mr. Valdez and 3,000 others were laid off when the project they were working on, the \$3 billion Fontainebleau Las Vegas casino and resort, filed for bankruptcy protection.

There have been few prospects. Workers who are members of the local union typically get first dibs. Travelers like Mr. Valdez are relegated to a secondary list.

Outside the apartment he shares with his wife, his truck is stocked with coolers, a microwave and a futon -- ready for the road. Ordinarily, he would be out of town, sleeping at rest stops with a pistol under the pillow. Now, he isn't sure there is work elsewhere.

On a recent afternoon, he leaned back in his recliner, the Weather Channel blaring and a bottle of beer in his hand.

His friend and fellow out-of-work traveling electrician, Ray Thomas, 60, recounted his plans to spend retirement in a camper, exploring the states that he hasn't been to for work. Mr. Thomas says he has worked out of 43 union halls since he has been on the road.

Messrs. Thomas and Valdez both became travelers because they were drawn to a lifestyle that kept them on the move. Others were forced on the road because there wasn't enough work through their local union.

Randy Roberson and Sheila Noble came here in 2007, hoping to find a permanent home. "There's no work in our home local, so we have to be a traveler," Ms. Noble said. "It's not a choice."

In Las Vegas, they paid down debt and rented a home with a Jacuzzi and a pool. "We were finally on our way to recovery," Mr. Roberson said. Then, in April, they were laid off from the Fontainebleau. By then, construction had ground nearly to a halt. Several other developments along the Strip were also abandoned. And in a few months, City Center will be finished, leaving thousands more construction workers -- including many travelers -- in the same situation: stuck here without a job.

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