

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## **OUR SKILLS, OUR FUTURE: SOLVING BC'S LOOMING SKILLS SHORTAGE**

A report prepared by  
the B.C. Federation of  
Labour.

November 22, 2004





## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

British Columbia will face a significant skills shortage over the next decade. The combination of major demographic shifts, advancing technological change, major project work (especially the 2010 Winter Olympics) and the expansion of new sectors of the provincial economy will place enormous pressure on labour market skills.

Making matters worse, the provincial government has radically changed our system of trades training. The changes make it more difficult, more expensive and more frustrating for workers to access and achieve full trade qualifications. The net result? At exactly the time we need to find new ways and more people to enter trades training, the provincial government's changes are moving BC down the wrong track.

The B.C. Federation of Labour believes that unless there is an immediate re-thinking of the provincial government's so-called new model for trades training, our province will not be able to adequately deal with the pending skill shortage. The economic consequences of ignoring this problem are severe, and assuming market forces will provide a proper solution is short-sighted and misguided.

There is a better alternative. It starts by recognizing the valuable role and contribution that workers and their unions have played in the development of skilled trades in this province over the last hundred years. Our input into the design and delivery of trades training must have an equal voice to that of employers. As well, a better alternative has to accept that improving our record of trades training and skills development will require more resources and stronger commitments from all involved including employers, government and training providers. Our model for progress includes reforms in six critical areas.

1. A governance structure for trades training that makes labour a full and equal partner in the development of training policies and priorities.
2. Better access to trades training by making it more affordable and more inclusive.
3. New measures to fund real improvements in trades training with emphasis on incentives that reward employers who take their commitment to training seriously.
4. Move BC back into line with provinces like Alberta and Quebec where compulsory trades certification is well established and properly enforced.
5. Build a stronger connection between training priorities and collective bargaining.
6. Strengthen our commitment to the principle of labour mobility by working with the federal and provincial governments to expand the Red Seal program.

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## Our Skills, Our Future: Solving BC's Looming Skills Shortage

### Introduction

Over the next decade British Columbia will face a significant skills shortage. Demographic factors such as an aging workforce will have a major impact on that shortage, but so too will the advancing pace of technological change, major project work (especially the 2010 Winter Olympics) and the expansion of new sectors within the provincial economy. The dramatic demographic shift can not be over emphasized. Thousands of skilled trades workers will retire in record numbers over the next decade. And, unless decisive action is taken soon, their knowledge and experience, that is essential for our quality of life, will retire with them.

Making matters worse, the provincial government has radically changed our system of trades training. The changes make it more difficult, more expensive and more frustrating for workers to access and achieve full trade qualifications. The net result? At exactly the time we need to find new ways and more people to enter trades training, the provincial government's changes are moving BC down the wrong track.

### Trades Training: How It Works & Why It's Important

To acquire full trade qualification as a journeyman, an individual becomes first an apprentice to learn a specific trade through a system of supervised employment and training. Practical skills are acquired through working with journeymen already skilled in the trade complemented with classroom-style technical training generally delivered by qualified instructors at public post-secondary institutes and colleges. Most apprenticeships involve roughly 80 percent on the job (or practical) training and 20 percent classroom training. On average, a 'ticket' is not issued until the individual successfully completes the required accredited hours of both practical and in-school training as well as a written exam; the hours requirements vary by trade, but are typically total about 6,000 to 8,000 hours.

To ensure that provincial training standards support the principle of labour mobility, Canada has developed national standards of trades training called the Red Seal Program. Those standards mean that, for designated trades, qualifications earned in one province are recognised in others. Developing that national standard was an enormous undertaking involving the federal and provincial

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governments as well as other key stakeholders. The result has been that, through the Red Seal Program, we have created a high uniform standard across the country for trades certification that allows for the effective mobility of the workforce across Canada.

Skilled trades workers have traditionally held considerable bargaining power in both industrial and non-industrial settings, a point that has not gone unnoticed in the corporate boardrooms and political circles. Canadian employers and their organizations for decades have called for a highly-skilled workforce to maintain high quality and high productivity in a global environment while at the same time supporting neo-conservative policies, the election of right-wing governments and their tax cutting, deregulating agendas. The pending skills shortage is yet more evidence that you can't build a modern economy through tax cuts and de-regulation. Resolving these problems will take commitment to action and most importantly, new investment in training.

But business and government moved to introduce labour market deregulation, to create a more "flexible" workforce. Inflexible or rigid labour markets were those that included minimum wages, severance pay, strong unions, unemployment insurance, equity initiatives, overtime provisions and occupational health and safety training and anything else that stood in the way of employers wishing to hire at the cheapest rate possible. Any law, any government policy, any social standard that interfered with the free labour market was seen as uncompetitive and damaging. It is no accident that union density in this area and the number of certified skilled trades has declined.

Successive financial cutbacks by the federal government in areas like labour market support programs and transfers to provinces for education and training have undermined opportunities to improve trades training in every region. Add to that the move within many provinces to both de-regulate and under-fund trades and technical training and it's clear that addressing our pending skills shortage will take a fundamental shift in both funding and support by government.

The Business Council on National Issues, now reinvented as the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, states in its policy on human development that, "access to high-quality education and training is essential to the maintenance of a world-leading labour force" while headlining on its website in November, 2004, that Canada needs a new round of tax cuts. Our hollowed-out education system in BC and elsewhere has all but eliminated the presence of the trades in the primary levels as school shops are shut down for lack of funding. Without exposure and support for the trades in the public school system, the dot.com world of glitz in the media holds appeal for

***The Canadian Council of Chief Executives, states in its policy on human development that, "access to high-quality education and training is essential to the maintenance of a world-leading labour force" while headlining on its website in November, 2004, that Canada needs a new round of tax cuts.***

youth, while the blue-collar trades so essential for our quality of life are downgraded as a lower class occupation.

Recognizing the importance of the trades to a strong economy, the NDP in the mid-1990s, contrary to trends elsewhere in the country, brought in the **Industry Training and Apprenticeship Commission (ITAC) Act** which laid the ground work for certification of the trades. ITAC, with strong representation from the stakeholders, especially organized labour, tackled a complex issue involving many levels and departments of government and allocated financial and human resources to ensure that the level and quality of training in BC was advanced. Given the cross section of interests that needed to be involved in advancing that training effort, one of ITAC's early priorities was to coordinate Entry Level Trades Training (ELTT) which not only accounted for a majority of ITAC's budget, but also provided foundation training for entry into the trade.

As well, ITAC provided the mechanism for revising and improving existing trades training through Trades Advisory Committees (TAC). Using the input of both worker and employer representatives, the TAC ensured that curriculum kept pace with the demands of a changing trade.

ITAC struggled on many fronts. It did not have the authority to enforce compulsory trades; that authority was placed in different legislation. Improvements in funding were difficult to find in a provincial budget where the demands for other program improvements were intense. Moreover, support within the employer community for ITAC's collaborative approach to trades training never enjoyed a broad base of support.

### **Liberals Put Apprenticeship Training into Crisis**

Soon after being elected, the Campbell government scrapped ITAC, cut staff and support for trades training from approximately 130 employees to just 18, introduced a 'de-regulated' trades training model and eliminated compulsory certification in designated trades. Under ITAC, there were eleven compulsory trades: automotive service technician, automotive collision technician, automotive painter, electrician, plumber, pipe fitter/steam fitter, sheet metal workers, power line technician, roofer, sprinkler system installer and refrigerator/air-conditioning mechanics. Under the Campbell government, all eleven lost the compulsory certification status.

As well, the new system relied on a self-help model where apprentices were required to understand the complexities of registration on-line, maintain their apprenticeship file and make all adjustments for employer changes. Given that 50 percent of apprentices come from the construction sector where short-term project work requires additional help for apprentices to bridge their

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training needs, the new system undermines the ability of apprentices to complete their training.

ITAC's replacement, the **Industry Training Authority (ITA) Act**, eliminated "apprenticeship" from more than the title. Unions with extensive experience in training and on-the-job education were marginalized from input while a new governing body composed of business representatives, pursued an agenda that has left this province in disarray with respect to skilled trades. Even industry was largely cut out of input into curriculum and standards for training. The result: deteriorating standards, reductions in the number of apprentices and deskilling of the workforce. There is no plan. There is no government supervised apprenticeship registration, education and accreditation system. There is no TQ system to recognize life experience.

According to figures presented in June 2004 at a national conference on Apprenticeship, the number of compulsory trades versus voluntary trades places BC behind most provinces in Canada. Quebec requires certification of all construction trades with Alberta following closely with compulsory certification in 20 trades and has the lowest attrition rate in apprenticeship training in Canada. (Globe & Mail, Jan 21, 2004) Manitoba is increasing the number of compulsory trades to 18.

For those wanting to pursue a trade the barriers are often insurmountable: the full cost of apprenticeship can easily reach \$7,000-\$8,000. Apprentices take a reduction in pay, spend thousands of dollars in tools and for those who are persistent, the process can take between seven and ten years to attain certification. Over that same period for every person that completes the journey to certification, hundreds drop out, discouraged as layoffs occur, and debts along with family obligations take priority over education. Apprenticeship openings are difficult to find even in times of skilled trade shortages.

Lost with the destruction of ITAC were local community-based ITAC counsellors or representatives who monitored training, tracked applications for examinations as well as administered the exams. These counsellors were particularly important for workers who did not have the benefit of a joint training board in their industry to support them. Most of these workers were in non-union settings and the counsellors' help ensured that apprentices were paid correctly and received their entitlement to incremental increases in their wage rate every six months.

They also assisted students with post-secondary education scheduling, worked to find apprenticeship placements, monitored on the job safety and training requirements, and gave input with respect to needs from curriculum to financial assistance for apprentices.

*"One of the most damaging things was the doing away of the counsellors to oversee the apprentices – proper training, safety, pay and the logging of hours."*

*"We've had a mindset for a couple of generations that you have to go to university to get a good job.... We have to take away the stigma of working with your hands. The secondary school system is skewed toward the 20 percent or so who go on to university. When we do have interested trades students, apprenticeship openings are almost non-existent – we need incentives for business to take on apprentices and unions to open up positions."*

*Paul Bascariol, High School Instructor, Nelson, BC*

British Columbia's at one time well-respected system is seriously eroding the 'Red Seal' or interprovincial trades ticket thus destroying the credibility of inter-provincial mobility of the trades.

The BC government claims of increased number of apprentices are based on enrolment only and do not take into account the drop-out rate. It is thought that many who enrol are unable to find placements or continue their training. With colleges dependent upon body counts for grants the incentive is with registration not completion of education. While we can enter into a debate about the current number of apprentices, it is meaningless when we know the quality of the system has been so seriously compromised. What we do know is this: for the word apprentice to have meaning, a serious overhaul of the system must be undertaken immediately. The unions in this province are not prepared to gut the skilled trades accreditation system by buying into a deskilling, deregulated agenda.

### **Compulsory Certification and Apprenticeship**

The Campbell government, under the ITA legislation, formally embraced the notion of "designer" trades – a fragmentation of the trades in which modules of the trade are broken out and credentialed – that watered down qualifications and wages. "Designer" trades are just that – an industry creation that will be short lived.

Changes to the **Safety Standards Act and Regulations** and the privatization of the provincial government's safety standards branch has led to the deregulation and reduction of the regulatory requirements for compulsory trades in BC. Now workers without a skilled trades certification are allowed to perform the work.

De-skilling through the fragmentation of the trades has been accomplished with changes to regulations that formerly protected workers on the job and the public where they live and work. The government has indicated we will see further deregulation in elevator, gas and boiler, and pressure vessels work.

Workers, without a core base in essential skills such as mathematics, technology and computer science as well as the combined experience of journeyman training and on-the-job learning, will not be able to keep up to the rapid changes happening in the workplace. While employers will discard those "designer" workers like an old pair of jeans, the workforce, the community and the economy will inherit the remnants. "Designer" workforces, poorly paid, are thrust into conditions with inadequate training, increasing the risk of workplace accidents and poor quality in the

*"I only worked non-union for a few months but there was an extreme difference compared to a union worksite. They [non-union] employer rushed us and forced us to cut corners. I've seen lots of stuff that shouldn't have gone on...Sometimes, we had to start before the 'Safety' [trained First Aid worker] arrived."*

*IBEW 4<sup>th</sup> Year Apprentice,  
West Kootenay*

final product. The price is passed on to the community and the consumer with either costly repairs or substantial increased risks of health, safety and environmental concerns such as fires, and pollution. Semi-skilled, the “designer” workforce has less mobility – no Red Seal – and a greater likelihood of long periods of unemployment with no cash savings to return to school.

The Globe & Mail in a series of articles in September 2003 on the looming shortages of skilled trades workers, described the Campbell government initiatives in less than glowing terms:

“British Columbia has embarked on an ambitious overhaul of apprenticeship and trade certification. It aims to develop “competencies” as well as comprehensive trades, on the theory that someone who wires houses doesn’t really need to be a full-spectrum electrician. This approach, unfortunately, smacks more of an attempt to cut labour costs quickly than a long-term plan for boosting the overall level of skills.” (Globe & Mail, Sept 1, 2003)

Government tried to duck criticism by indicating ‘credits’ from various modular programs could add up, but add up to what? Without supervision and mentoring by journeypersons, without thorough educational grounding in the basic math, physics and computer science for the trade, the ‘credit’ system is nothing but an empty promise.

Removing certification requirements and lowering union density begins the ever-downward spiral of wages with workers pitted in a ‘bidding war’ against other workers thus lowering the standard of living. It is a legacy that deters workers from staying in the trades and discourages others from entering.

What is critical to remember in all these changes is that the employer community is not completely on side with the move to de-regulated trades. A recent survey reported at the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum in June 2004 found 90 percent of mechanical contractors supported compulsory certification and apprenticeship. In a 1997 survey by the BC Construction Association (Apprenticeship: A Construction Industry Perspective, April 1997) of the over 300 contractors sampled (including a significant number of non-union contractors) it was found that over 73 percent supported “full scope of trade training” and did not favour any move to institute “task training.”

## **The Decade For Decision, The Decade For Action**

The pressure for skilled trades workers in British Columbia will only

***“Students are constantly calling with questions. Before ITAC was scrapped, regional counsellors used to deal with problems such as unsafe working conditions and non-payment of wages. Others are frustrated, unable to find employers who will take on an apprentice or don’t know what to do when they get laid off and want to continue their apprenticeship. There is no one to assist a student in scheduling exams or schooling.*”**

***Shirley Caldwell, UFCW Training Centre***

increase with numerous mega-projects including the Olympics. A survey of Western province business organizations found 73 out of 76 expect serious skilled trades shortages in the next few years. (Globe and Mail, May 26, 2004)

The pressure will be on the government and with an election due in 2005 the public's attention will be drawn into the political area. Now is the time for mobilizing a campaign to regain the skilled trades status – its importance to our collective and individual quality of life. Alberta, Quebec and Manitoba are aggressively promoting apprenticeship training – even establishing mobile classrooms for remote areas. Ontario's newly elected Liberal government made apprenticeship a prominent election issue. It is an issue that can touch and engage all elements of society.

### **'What you can't see will hurt you'**

Wiring our schools, homes, retirement and community centres and workplaces (to name a few) with unlicensed workers is a major safety concern. Poor construction can lead to fire, explosions, and debilitating indoor air quality – with toxic mould problems affecting children in schools, families in homes, and senior's residences as well as workplaces. Government is abandoning its duty to the citizens of British Columbia and turning over health and safety to the industry to monitor itself – a practice that years ago led to serious tragedies.

### **Saying 'No' to 'McCon' Jobs**

Parents want their children to have a secure future and youth want meaningful, decent paying jobs, not 'McCon' jobs – fast-track, low wage, de-skilled construction jobs that con youth into believing they are in a bone fide apprenticeship program that will give them a nationally recognized trade and long-term job security. As consumers we want quality workmanship and quality products. As educators we want to motivate students with adequate teaching resources, up-to-date technological instruments, tools and equipment and apprenticeship positions for students to get the accredited on-the-job hours.

We must take a stand against 'McCon' jobs. We have the necessary experience to build a credible skilled trades system in the province. What is needed is the political will to make it happen.

### **A Model For Progress**

The B.C. Federation of Labour believes that unless there is an immediate re-thinking of the provincial government's so-called new model for trades training, our province will not be able to adequately

***"It's a huge issue. There's not an employer in the province that's happy about it unless their viewpoint is such that they're just looking for cheap labour – and if they could, they'd hire primates and feed them bananas."***

**Dan Mott, Electrical Contractor, BC**

deal with the pending skill shortage. The economic consequences of ignoring this problem are severe. And assuming market forces will provide a proper solution is short-sighted and misguided.

There is a better alternative. It starts by recognizing the valuable role and contribution that workers and their unions have played in the development of skilled trades in this province over the last hundred years. Our input into the design and delivery of trades training must have an equal voice to that of employers. As well, a better alternative has to accept that improving our record of trades training and skills development will require more resources and stronger commitments from all involved including employers, government and training providers. Our model for progress includes reforms in six critical areas.

## 1) Governance

Without bringing together all the stakeholders in a collaborative approach, including a strong union representation, the skilled trades issues will not be solved. It is only the journey person in the trade who really understands thoroughly all the elements of the work. Government must bring together various departments that deal with all aspects from education to safety to certification and the financing of an infrastructure to support skilled trades development, certification, and on-going up-grading. Educators from the primary through post secondary levels must be active with recruitment and education in an environment that supports students entering a trade. Business must be involved in assisting with projecting employment and skills needs along with reasserting the need for certified trades and continuous upgrading.

Without all the stakeholders involved there will be no coordination to ensure adequate incentives are there to attract and keep apprentices in the system, ensure the education “seats” and materials are available, that reasonable apprentice quotas are established and reached, that standards are set and met in skills, health, safety and the environment.

Our model for progress would include changes to trades training governance that:

- Establishes an industry and trades training governance structure in which workers and their unions have an equal voice in the development of policy and the setting of priorities.
- Restores the Trade Advisory Committees to advise government on curriculum and standards for apprentices

*“To get a good job these days requires a lot of training, but the BC Liberals are making it tougher and more expensive to get that training.”*

*Bobbi-Joe Delorne, Diesel Technician Apprentice, Vancouver Community College*

with emphasis on upgrading of journeypersons as new technologies and practices are developed.

- Recognizes the need for curriculum to be rooted in the BC experience with reference to the appropriate regulatory authority such as safety regulations, codes, etc. developed by balanced trade advisory committees working with public post-secondary providers to assure the quality of instruction and training. Wholesale purchase of courses and examinations from other provinces will erode standards and compromise safety.
- Establishes an accurate reporting system to measure outcomes to deliver monthly or quarterly reports on the number of apprentices by trade, in all levels, from entry to completion. A system for tracking 'drop-outs' by trade, employer, geography must also be developed.
- Establishes the T.Q. (Trades Qualified) system to recognize qualifications must be reinstated with accurate reporting of the number of applicants, examinations, and successful completions by month/quarter released for review.

***Without all the stakeholders involved there will be no coordination to ensure adequate incentives are there to attract and keep apprentices in the system.***

## **2) Access**

Improving our system of trades training and skills development also means making a system that is truly accessible to everyone who wants to improve their skills. Current barriers only ensure that skills training are difficult to access and complete.

Our model for progress would include changes to trades training access that:

- Develop Student/Apprentice Support models to facilitate easy access alongside continual monitoring of progress with an infrastructure designed to foster an entry geared to final certification approach. Students must be able to access financial assistance. The substantial financial sacrifice that apprentices already make through lower wages should be recognised by moving to eliminate tuition fees for apprentices.
- Standardize programs such as Entry Level Trades Training (ELTT) and Secondary School Apprenticeship (SSA) throughout the province with a centralized system for logging hours/exams and appropriate training relevant to the apprenticeship system.
- Provide apprentices with financial support for tools and education – perhaps free education for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year apprentices - to solidify their commitment to a skilled

trades career. For high school students, knowing they can get started without a large financial commitment/debt is a huge incentive to students. Ways to mitigate layoffs that delay certification must also be examined.

- Provide trade and apprenticeship counselling from primary through post-secondary education. As well, develop tutorial support for math and computer science to meet entrance into pre-apprenticeship training programs.
- Reinstate TQ programs with outreach to immigrant communities and special programs for language and math upgrading to meet certification standards.
- Establish a broad government-sponsored public campaign to reassert the importance of a trades education and certification with special emphasis on reaching youth.

### 3) Finance

Addressing the critical problem of trades training will not happen unless we are prepared to achieve real increases in the resources devoted to trades training. While government has been the major contributor, we need to consider new ways to both add resources and find the discipline to make sure that training becomes a well-established part of every workplace.

Our model for progress would include changes to trades training that:

- Makes meaningful progress towards either a grant/levy system or a tax credit program that rewards those that participate in apprenticeship training while recognizing, through public investments, that all of society benefits from a highly skilled and certified workforce.
- Provides employers with incentives to hire apprentices including legislation requiring a ratio of trades to apprentices.
- Support employers who are prepared to develop full apprenticeship programs. With the growing number of small businesses, innovative programs that assist small businesses or the not-for-profit sector to take on apprentices must be developed. For example, a tripartite approach between government, Boards of Education, and unions could develop a summer student program for high school students to earn credits toward apprenticeships involved in building and maintaining schools. Municipalities with building programs for parks and

***“With the elimination of counsellors, there’s no one policing the type of work the apprentice is doing. There’s no mechanism to validate the job hours logged. With ITA all management has been turned over to the employers and not all understand governance of apprenticeship.”***

***Bob Davis, Instructor,  
Kwantlen University College,  
Surrey***

recreational facilities could be encouraged to hire summer student/apprentices. Perhaps non-profit organizations such as Habitat for Humanity could provide students with valuable community and skills experience under a government sponsored and subsidized summer employment program.

- Allocate adequate research resources for planning, taking into account future economic needs with education resources and changing demographics.

#### **4) Compulsory Trades**

The link critical between skills development, safety and trades training has been broken by the BC Liberals' de-regulation of trades training. The result has meant that the regulation of safety standards is either not being done at all or is being downloaded onto municipal governments with insufficient resources to do the job. Either outcome is bad for consumers and for workers.

Our model for progress would include changes to trades training that:

- Reinstatement a system of compulsory trades that would bring BC back into line with provinces like Alberta and Quebec.
- Establish and fund a system of full and proper enforcement of compulsory trades standards to ensure that every workplace respects those standards. Penalties for non-compliance should be substantial and demonstrate that public policy supports the principle of compulsory trades.

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#### **5) Collective Bargaining**

Our capacity to negotiate collectively on behalf of our members provides the labour movement with a powerful tool to advance important issues. Our history has demonstrated that when we are successful at the bargaining table, we are often able to translate those benefits into our communities as well. In that regard, we need to elevate the priority that we give to trades training and skills development when we are bargaining with employers.

Our model for progress would require affiliates to give new priority to trades training and skill development by:

- Encouraging every union to develop bargaining strategies that would include apprenticeship quotas as well as financial support for training and skills development.

- Working with affiliates to develop a public campaign to support our model for progress. That campaign should target the May 2005 provincial election to ensure that training and skills development becomes a more critical issue in the months ahead.
- Continuing to pressure the employer community to re-think its support for the provincial government's approach to trades training, especially the governance model that has developed under the ITA.

## 6) Mobility

One of the most significant guarantees under Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms is our right to mobility, our right to have our skills recognized across the country. It is not only a critical right for workers; it is an important benefit for the economy. When workers have true mobility, when their skills are recognized in every province, productivity is strengthened. However, the BC Liberals have implemented a trades training and skills development agenda that threatens our mobility. Their move to establish less than full trades (designer trades) runs completely counter to the principle of mobility.

Our model for progress would include changes to trades training that:

- Gives unqualified support for the Red Seal Program including working closely with the Federal government, Canadian Apprenticeship Forum and the Canadian Council of Directors of Apprenticeship;
- Works with other provinces and the federal government to strengthen and expand the Red Seal Program to ensure that all trades receive similar recognition and protection of their basic right to full mobility.

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