

Speech by

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of the
Canadian Labour Congress**

to the

Canadian Apprenticeship Forum - Conference

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8:30 a.m.**

Ladies and gentlemen;
Brothers and sisters:

I am pleased to be with you this morning...to be able to share my thoughts on the state of Canada's apprenticeship programs.

And, in particular, to speak to the barriers to mobility and portability that hobble our efforts to develop a national strategy on apprenticeship training and placement.

Enlightened self-interest requires that we do a far better job in matching the skills and smarts of this country's citizens to the demands of an economy that is both increasingly complex and ever-more-globalized.

I use the word 'citizens' deliberately.

For apprenticeship is more than a labour issue.

And more than a business issue.

It is a national, public issue of concern to all Canadians – whether existing workers, students or parents of the members of tomorrow's workforce.

The Canadian Labour Congress, representing some 3 million working men and women, strongly believes that apprenticeship demands priority attention from policymakers that life-long education and training should be central to the social and economic agenda of every government in this country.

I feel quite passionate about this issue.

As many of you know, I'm a tradesperson myself.

That trade provided me with an opportunity for advancement.

It fulfilled the dream of my great-grandfather, who left Italy to seek a new country where the futures of working men and women weren't ordained at birth.

They don't call a certificate a 'ticket' for nothing!

For my generation, it was indeed a ticket – a ticket to a better life.

That's a claim I wish I could make for today's young men and women.

We know that the skills requirements and technical complexity of jobs are increasing.

We know that employers are desperate for trained workers.

We know we have workers who want training.

And what do we have? A skills crisis.

We have an inability of governments to match resources to needs.

We have governments fighting over jurisdictions rather than dealing with the real training problems.

And, yes, we do have a refusal by the business sector to pull its weight.

Is it any wonder why young people remains so reluctant to persue a career in the trades?

The latest employment numbers show we are failing our youth when it comes to job creation and yet we have skilled jobs just waiting to be filled.

All of the ingredients are there. What's missing is the will and the vision to put them all together.

I know I am preaching to the converted.

I want to acknowledge that this audience is made of so many who toil in obscurity trying to improve our apprenticeship programs.

Yet, we must all acknowledge that two years ago, almost to the day, I addressed many of you at the CAF's Vancouver Summit on the same needs with the same purpose.

Most of us left the Vancouver conference feeling energized.

We dared hope that – finally – the time for progressive, proactive action on the apprenticeship challenge was at hand.

Regrettably, that hasn't happened.

We have at best stood still. And, I fear, we have in fact moved backwards.

I need look no further than British Columbia, home province to both myself and my fellow speaker, Terry Brown.

When it comes to apprenticeship, BC has entered the twenty-first century with a blinkered ideology better suited to the 1800s.

The historic role of apprenticeship training was to generate workers with a reliable, comprehensive set of widely-recognized skills.

It was then up to individual employers to fine-tune those skills to meet their particular needs.

British Columbia has stood this time-tested model on its head, in favour of so-called 'Task Training'.

This move by the B.C. government has done more to roll back the clock and frustrate national standards and portability than any other single governmental action in our history.

'Task Training' grants trades qualification certificates to those who complete only segments or modules of a trades program.

B.C. workers used to receive a 'ticket' that guaranteed them as a fully-trained tradesperson with a full set of skills.

Now, they receive piecemeal certificates that have as much value as Boy Scout proficiency badges.

The Mayor of Vancouver – Larry Campbell – recently commented to an Ottawa audience that it's now easier in his city to get an appointment with a brain surgeon than with an electrician.

That's not to trivialize surgeons. But, as anyone here who has ever experienced a blackout or any other electrical problem knows, the value of a competent, fully-trained electrician.

That witty quip of Mayor Campbell reinforces three points that all of us in this room know and fully appreciate:

One – the value of skilled tradespeople to the quality of life in our communities;

Two – the reality of a critical shortage of such skills; and

Three – that we are not providing enough young people with proper training.

The B.C. government is now denying a whole generation of young people the chance to acquire recognized, reliable and portable skills.

Anyone going through the new B.C. system will have no mobility and little value...except to contractors who want to cut corners by paying handyman wages to turn a quick buck.

This is not portability and mobility; it is in fact thinly-disguised servitude.

Other provinces make decisions that defeat the purposes an apprenticeship must serve.

B.C.'s 'Task Training' is just larger than the usual examples.

We, at the Canadian Labour Congress are hearing more and more frustrations expressed over the barriers thrown up by British Columbia and other provinces.

The discontent has reached the point that we are being asked to consider the feasibility of a court challenge of the B.C. system, on the basis that 'Task Training' is a breach of the mobility rights laid out in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Apprenticeship should not be subjected to the changing ideological and political winds.

Just as the Charter of Rights is the 'people's Charter', our apprenticeship system belongs to all the citizens.

It is unconscionable that governments are weakening their apprenticeship programs at a time when recognition of the value of enhanced apprenticeship training is increasing throughout North America.

At a time of growing economic integration, we need to be setting up systems that maximize workers' ability to work anywhere.

Governments need to expand – and not tear down – our apprenticeship system.

Doing so will enable workers to achieve their full potential.

And, at the same time, help the economy to grow and create more jobs.

Much lip-service is paid to this goal.

The federal government claims to want a 30 per cent increase in employer investment in training.

But what's Ottawa doing about it? Next to nothing!

They have erected huge roadblocks to expanded training and apprenticeship.

They have gutted and plundered the same employment insurance program that is now Ottawa's only contribution to training.

As for business...well, the statistics speak for themselves.

Averaged over all employed workers, Canadian businesses invest barely \$180 a year on worker training.

That amounts to less than two days a year.

And far too much of that meagre amount is spent on training for managers and white-collar professionals.

Total employer investment in training is about seven-tenths of one per cent of Canada's total payroll costs.

That's half the average of the OECD group of industrialized countries.

And if business people don't think it's fair to compare us to European countries, how about looking at our neighbours to the south?

A full 40 per cent of American workers have access to training.

This is a full 10 percentage points above Canada.

As I said, the facts speak for themselves. And they tell a sad story.

This sad story begins with absence of leadership at the federal level.

The federal government let the people down with their withdrawal from this field.

Nationally, we have still not recovered from the repeal in 1996 of the National Training Act.

This short-sighted action reversed a long history of federal support for workplace training.

And that devolution was done without any matching commitment by the provinces.

The result of this was to shift the responsibility and the cost of training to the individual.

It has had the predictable consequence of skyrocketing tuition fees and mounting individual debt to get training.

That is, it created a further disincentive.

It is time to stop treating employer investment in job-related training as a mere private business decision.

Like workplace health and safety, workplace training is everybody's business.

There is plenty of scope at both the federal and provincial level for public policy that would recognize and reward employer investment in training and set minimum so that there is a level playing field throughout the country.

You know, Stephen Harper attracted a lot of attention with his infamous suggestion that Alberta surrounds itself with a so-called 'firewall'.

Yet when it comes to trades mobility, we have long had a set of firewalls between jurisdictions right across this country.

It doesn't have to be this way.

In the European Union, each country has nationwide standards recognized by other countries in the union.

Nations as diverse as Portugal, France and Sweden can seemingly ensure portability and mobility for their workforces.

So, why can't we do the same within one country?

Only, I suggest, because we lack the collective political will to stand up to those who put personal gain – political and economic – before national well-being.

I would like to put forward some concrete suggestions to deal with the portability and mobility issue.

Ottawa should take an aggressive lead in developing a federal-provincial-territorial accord on a national training and apprenticeship strategy.

This strategy, in which labour and business would exercise key roles and responsibilities, would see agreement on:

- a list of trades required by Canada, based on a National Occupational Analysis;
- a common, appropriate title for each trade; and
- a standard curriculum for each trade.

The end result of this process would be an Interprovincial Seal of Proficiency that would facilitate the movement of workers across the country.

All identified trades would be regulated, with a computerized national test bank ensuring that pan-Canadian standards are maintained.

No jurisdiction could create a trade without input from all stakeholders.

The federal government would play a further role in seeking international recognition for Canadian apprenticeship standards.

The quid-pro-quo would be the recognition of foreign credentials.

Potential employers still routinely ignore resumés from those with overseas educations.

The failure to take advantage of the skills of new Canadians is a major impediment to effectively managing our skilled trades shortage.

Many of you will be familiar with the story of Ivy Zheng, reported late last year in the *Globe and Mail*.

Ms. Zheng had been an engineer with the Chinese space program.

She in fact won a citation for designing a rocket component that helped launch a Chinese astronaut into space.

Having emigrated to Toronto in 2001, Ms. Zheng spent two fruitless years searching for an engineering position.

In order to support herself, she ended up making cinnamon buns in a Toronto subway concourse.

There are all too many Ivy Zhengs in this country.

Theirs is a personal tragedy. It is also a tragedy for the Canadian economy.

We cannot afford to carry on with such losses or waste or under-use of the talents of our people.

All of us also have a role to play in reversing the stereotype of so-called 'dead-end trades jobs'.

A community college president recently remarked to me that his trades graduates were in fact the only students who moved immediately into secure, well-paying jobs capable of supporting a family.

Skilled tradespeople can earn as much and more as many professionals.

This pervasive trades stigma should be aggressively countered at every opportunity.

We are late, scandalously late, in recognizing the need to adequately train and recognize the skills of our citizens.

We can no longer afford to just talk about the need for action.

Our history tells us that skilled tradespeople created this country's labour movement.

No surprise, then, unions were pioneers in developing reliable skills training and the recognized and portable apprenticeship certification.

We have knowledge and expertise that deserve to be heard and seriously considered. Pilot projects like what we in the Canadian Labour Congress are proposing with our idea that the EI program can be harnessed to provide training insurance deserve to be explored.

Success stories like we see in the construction sector today need to be recognized and expanded into other sectors.

Unions can also contribute leadership and vision.

We in this room have the vision.

This Conference is entitled 'Building on Commitments'.

I suggest we rededicate ourselves to not only building commitments, but also seeing those commitments implemented by the time we next meet!

Thank you.

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