

**Addressing  
climate change  
an easy fit for  
unionized  
construction**

## tBy Leslie Dyson

There will be an astounding amount of work for skilled union tradespeople when governments and industry get onboard with truly green construction initiatives.

John Calvert, a political scientist and associate professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University, said, "There is an enormous potential to create new construction jobs in energy conservation and retrofitting, given the size of the existing stock of buildings and the urgency of reducing GHG emissions and energy use."

In his report *Climate Change and its Discontents*, Calvert said, "Successful green construction requires a highly trained workforce. Much of the work involves very tight tolerances and careful installation of components in a wide variety of building types, erected at different times with different technologies and different materials."

Innovations are coming on stream at a rapid rate thanks to the work of progressive climate scientists, architects, planners, engineers, and developers.

However, "the current framework supports the status quo and undermines efforts to restructure the construction industry. "The industry is failing, by a wide margin, to achieve sufficient progress on climate issues," he said.

*Tradetalk* readers are well aware of the problems:

- an unregulated market where the primary objective is to maximize profits and minimize anything that gets in the way of that goal
- heavy reliance on labour sub-contracting and precarious employment
- poorly enforced building standards, statutory requirements, and employment standards
- a low-bid culture that results in a race to the bottom as firms cut corners on labour, materials, design, and technology
- an extensive underground economy which allows tax evasion, circumvention of regulations, concealed illegal activities, and the use of untrained and unskilled workers

### The solutions are:

- provide a greater role for the workforce—and the unions that represent it
- develop a training and apprenticeship system that gives workers the additional skills needed for low-carbon construction
- expand the number of trades that require compulsory training and certification because it provides workers with greater job security and long-term careers

- encourage government/industry labour agreements that include commitments to local hire, apprenticeship training, and training for people in equity groups
  - ensure that provinces and municipalities enforce statutory requirements of CPP, EI, WCB, building codes, health & safety regulations, and employment standards
  - introduce a comprehensive contractor licensing system and registration of workers to make it easier to monitor abuses of the system, protect workers' interests, and provide more effective consumer protection
  - require all construction employers, contractors, and self-employed owner-operators to pay a compulsory training levy and host apprentices
- Calvert said buildings are at the top of the list and require urgent attention. They produce more than 30% of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and account for almost 40% of energy use. Conserving energy requires designing and introducing new energy conservation systems in buildings under construction and retrofitting existing buildings.

This transformation involves every step in the supply chain:

- the owners who purchase construc-

tion services

- the architects, planners, and engineers who design the buildings
- the general contractors and sub-contractors who oversee projects and,
- the trades who actually carry out the work on the building sites

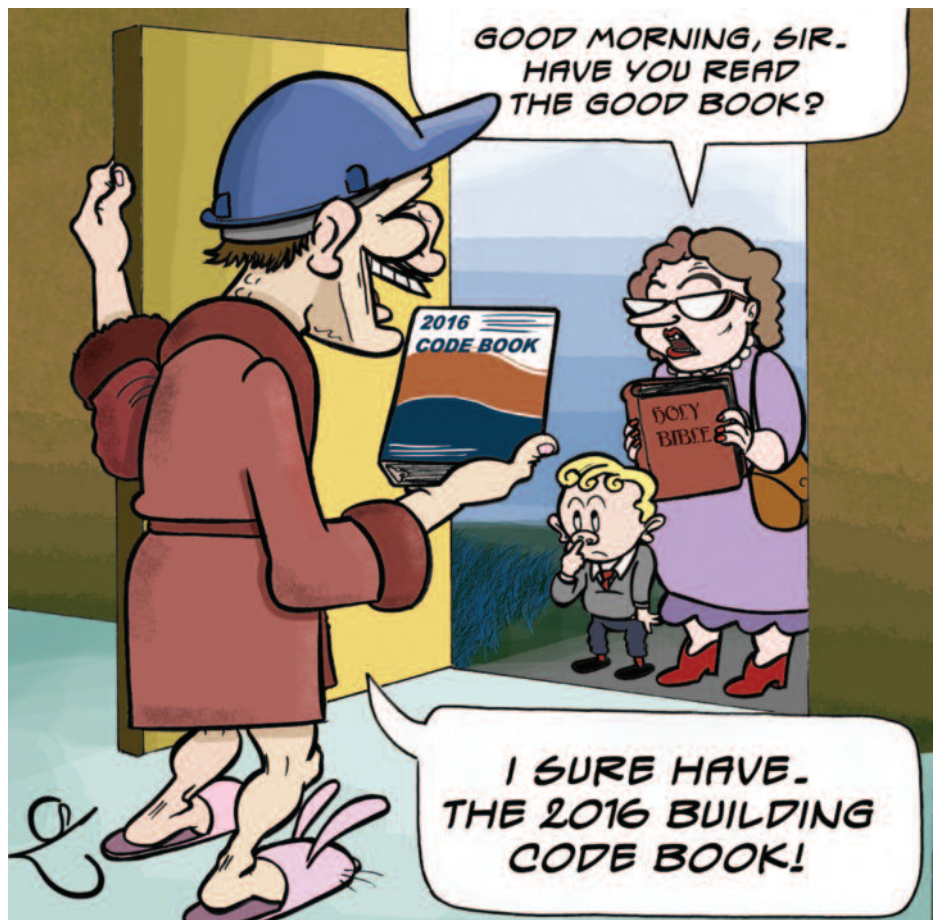
### Passing along the risk and responsibility

Climate considerations are taking second place. If landlords do not pay the cost of heat and electricity, they see little benefit in paying for improved energy conservation. Tenants have no reason—and often no capacity—to invest in initiatives in places they don't own and may not rent long enough to see the benefits.

The construction industry sees dramatic fluctuations in the business cycle and this makes investment risky. The industry does not control and often can't predict large economic factors.

Developers and prime contractors deal with fluctuating construction demands by ramping up and down their use of sub-contractors. It also reduces the risk of a major capital investment in equipment and facilities that have to remain idle for long peri-

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Shawn Luke cartoon



Joshua Berson photo

*Expertly installed mechanical insulation reduces greenhouse gases and saves building owners money.*

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ods of time. Contractors have also used sub-contracting to circumvent unionization and abandon their responsibilities for training.

Responsibility has been shifted to smaller operators with no capacity for training. Flexibility has been achieved at the expense of workers who face periodic unemployment. High labour turnover means the industry loses valuable skills and squanders a significant part of its investments in training.

Unions can address this problem

through multi-employer agreements. But most of the industry opposes this option.

**Underground economy**

Government reluctance to regulate the underground economy reflects a broader commitment to neoliberal principles. Anti-union labour legislation and the willingness of governments to impose back-to-work legislation when unions take strike action are evidence of this.

In the meantime, anyone can set up shop and provide construction services. There is no quality control, no

protection for purchasers, and no guarantee that employers are following employment standards, health and safety legislation, or meeting their statutory contributions to EI, CPP and WCB.

One reason underground contractors continue to function is that they avoid building inspections, particularly in the residential renovations sector where work is often easy to conceal.

**Troubles with training**

The volatile nature of construction means that workers take significant risks when they commit to the long-

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# Quality control

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term training associated with a full three- to five-year apprenticeship. Most have no guarantee that they will have the steady employment they need to fulfill the on-the-job component of their apprenticeship program. Given that most are from working class backgrounds, they do not have significant financial resources to carry them through prolonged periods of unemployment—an issue compounded by the fact that apprentice wage rates start at half or less of that of a journeyman.

The paradox is that when there is ample work, apprentices may not wish to go back to school due to the loss of income, but also because they fear not getting work when they are finished their classroom studies each year.

Problems are exacerbated by free-ridership where employers, who do not train, benefit from those who do by poaching the latter's newly qualified journeymen.

**Negative attitudes**

Many of those advocating for the greening of the industry are not interested in or are hostile to unions. "Most policy makers do not see them as major players in the green transformation of the industry. In much of the literature on greening the construction industry, unions simply do not exist," Calvert said.

They do not understand that "construction workers are constantly involved in problem solving on the work site. They normally do this without close supervision. Often on smaller projects only one or two members of a trade are responsible for handling the work and they are expected to do it on their own in a way that meets the professional standards mandated by the architects, engineers, or prime contractors."

**Getting on with it**

Some BC Building Trades have taken the initiative to get on with the work that has to be done.

The BC Insulators Local 118 has developed a comprehensive package of new building code measures and procurement requirements that significantly reduce GHG emissions and energy consumption and it has presented the information on numerous occasions to B.C. municipalities and the provincial government. It has also worked closely with BCIT to develop climate modules for the classroom-training program for insulator apprentices. And it has worked extensively with the BC Federation of Labour Environment Committee and the BC Green Jobs Coalition to advocate for tougher climate policies. (See article on following page.)

The IBEW has worked closely with industry to develop

new standards and training modules for the installation of solar equipment and electric-vehicle technology. Qualified electricians can now add a certification in these areas to their trades' qualifications. (See article on Pg. 18)

Low-carbon construction "aligns well with the building trades unions' goal of maintaining high standards of skills and supporting the apprenticeship and training system," Calvert said.

"A high-skill, high-wage industry will improve the wages of unionized construction workers and follows naturally from the BC Building Trades' culture and the pride that skilled trades people have in using their skills and responding to a wide range of situations—a key feature of effective climate retrofitting."



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