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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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LABOUR MANAGEMENT CO-OPERATION IN APPRENTICESHIP TRAINING

J. L. E. PRICE

Four years ago (in March 1944) over one hundred representatives of building trades employer and employee organizations from all parts of the Province of Quebec attended a conference in Montreal, in response to a combined invitation extended by the Builders' Exchange of Montreal and The Montreal Building Trades Joint Committee, for the purpose of exploring the possibility of developing co-operative action on the part of labour and management in the training of building trades apprentices.

It is of interest to note that this initial two-day conference in Montreal was unique in the sense that no record could be found of any previous attempt ever having been made anywhere in the Province to effect a permanent partnership arrangement as between employee organizations and employer organizations in the building industry, for joint effort in promoting efficient apprenticeship training.

In the course of the conference the views of management, labour and educationists were frankly expressed and debated in detail, culminating in the unanimous decision to forthwith appoint a « Special Temporary Provincial Committee for Building Trades Apprenticeship » to which committee — composed of equal representation of employers and employees — there was delegated the responsibility of preparing, for the approval of all of the different employer and employee organizations represented at the conference, a Brief to be submitted to the Provincial Department of Labour in Quebec, embodying the joint recommendations of labour and management as to ways and means of relieving the serious shortage of properly skilled building tradesmen, through the medium of improved apprenticeship training facilities.

Preparation of the desired Brief called for six months of intensive research and patient negotiation in that it involved the development of an entirely new system of apprenticeship training which would be acceptable not only to employer and employee organizations but also to the Provincial Government.

The first effort of the Special Committee was to realistically review the average skill of building trades labour throughout the Province as it stood at that time, i.e. in the spring of 1944.

This review revealed that the average efficiency of skilled labour in most of the building trades had been allowed to gradually decline to the alarmingly low level then obtaining, for four main reasons, viz:

1. Too much traditional reliance on immigration from Europe as the source of supply of properly skilled labour.
2. Failure on the part of both employer and employee organizations to recognize the incapable need to promote efficient apprentice training within the Province, on an adequate scale, as the only effective means of replenishing the supply of and meeting the ever growing demand for properly skilled tradesmen.
3. Too much laxity in some trades in granting « Competency Cards » to incompetent workers.
4. Lack of effort on the part of so many concerned in making careers in the building trades more attractive to the youth of the Province.

The next step of the Special Committee was to conduct an exhaustive enquiry into the underlying causes of the very limited interest in building trades apprenticeship displayed by youths graduating from high schools throughout the Province.

This enquiry brought to light many important factors, such as:

1. Common knowledge of the fact that building trades wage rates in Quebec had always been lower than in some of the other Provinces of the Dominion had undoubtedly played a part in rendering building trades apprenticeship less attractive than it might otherwise have been to the youth of the Province.
2. The rates of pay provided for 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year apprentices at that time (i.e. in the spring of 1944) offered insufficient monetary inducement to the average youth.

3. There was reluctance on the part of many youths to be bound in advance for a fixed period of years without hope of more rapid advancement to skilled tradesman status, where earned by reason of superior effort and ability.
4. There was an understandable fear on the part of many youths or on the part of their parents or guardians that an apprenticeship might not always provide an all round training in all of the skills of the chosen trade, but only in some sections of that trade. For example, the apprentice carpenter might be employed on rough carpentry for the entire duration of his apprenticeship without ever being given an opportunity to learn anything about finished carpentry work.
5. Lastly, there was the disinclination of some parents or guardians to irrevocably bind a son or ward, as the case might be, to one specific employer for a fixed period of years.

Next to be considered was the position of organized labour in the scheme of things and here it was recognized that the primary concern of the labour unions would naturally always be to keep the ratio of apprentices to qualified tradesmen within reasonable predetermined limits in each and every trade.

Long consideration was then devoted to the need to promote apprenticeship training on a scale adequate to meet the unprecedented demands which would undoubtedly materialize in the post-war reconstruction era. It was obvious to the Committee that this large scale apprenticeship training could never be accomplished by relying exclusively on the long established system of indenturing the individual apprentice to the individual employer. In this connection, it was emphasized that because of the wide fluctuations in both the volume and the kinds of work carried out by the average building trades employer from time to time, it would be most illogical to expect the average employer to make permanent apprenticeship contract commitments greatly in excess of his average minimum year-round labour requirements. To cite what is perhaps a somewhat extreme example, take the case of a large general contractor who might occasionally have as many as 250 bricklayers on his payroll for a relatively short period of time, whereas he is unable to provide steady year-round permanent employment for more than an average of say 25 brick-

layers. Obviously this particular employer could not safely enter into formal apprenticeship contracts with more than the number of apprentices warranted on the basis of his year-round permanent average minimum of 25 bricklayer tradesmen, which automatically raised the question as to who would be expected to assume the responsibility of signing apprenticeship contracts with the apprentices attached to the other 225 bricklayer tradesmen who were temporarily on this employer's payroll for part of the year.

Taking all these things into consideration, it was finally the unanimous conclusion of the Special Committee that the large scale future building trades apprenticeship needs of the Province could be satisfactorily met only through the medium of co-operative action on the part of employer and employee organizations and the Provincial Department of Labour, in arranging for apprentices to be trained collectively, as wards of legally constituted Apprenticeship Commissions, with permanent training centres located at suitable places throughout the Province, each separate Centre being operated under the joint direction of local management and labour bodies, in conjunction with the local Building Trades Joint Committee. It was believed that his new large scale method of apprenticeship training could be introduced without in any way disrupting the long established method based on the indenturing of individual apprentices to individual employers.

The Brief, which was finally presented to Hon. Antonio Barrette, Minister of Labour at Quebec, on October 10th 1944, undoubtedly provided a large measure of inspiration for the Quebec Apprenticeship Assistance Act which was placed on the statutes in May 1945 and which — for all practical purposes — made possible the implementation of all of the different recommendations embodied in the Brief.

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