

Issue Brief

Union Apprenticeship Training Centers



Overview

The Alberta government through the Department of Innovation and Advanced Education is consistently being pressured by building trade unions to fund and accredit union training centers to deliver apprenticeship training. They also seek approval to allow union controlled apprenticeship committees (JAC's) to enter into training contracts with individual employee apprentices. This deviates from the current framework which maintains that apprentice "indentureship" contracts be solely between individual employers and apprentices.

Merit Supports

- Maintaining the neutrality of the current apprenticeship delivery model and continuing to support apprenticeship training through publicly funded and community supported colleges and training institutes
- Sending a strong and consistent message to organizations that seek to access public funds that the Alberta government will continue to support publicly funded, non-affiliated post-secondary institutions that provide apprenticeship training

Merit Opposes

- Diverting operating funds from publicly funded and community supported colleges and technical institutes that results in a fragmentation of apprenticeship training delivery
- Politicizing the delivery of apprenticeship training by introducing matters relating to unionization as part of the process of acquiring technical training
- Any third party involvement that would weaken the employer/employee link, as only employers can assume full responsibilities and obligations for the training of apprentices
- Permitting unions to indenture apprentices, as adherence to union directives such as assisting the union in organizing drives places the potential apprentice in a vulnerable position as he/she is dependent on the union for continued livelihood through the hiring hall or dispatch system.

Background

Alberta has arguably the strongest apprenticeship training system in Canada with a world-wide reputation for excellence. This is because the system is led by industry through the Alberta Industry and Training Board structure in partnership with Innovation and Advanced Education and Campus Alberta colleges or training institutes, which demands a neutral training environment free from bias and controlling interests.

Approximately 80 percent of apprenticeship training is on the job learning through an employer with a journeyman or series of journeymen mentoring and monitoring the apprentice's progress. The remaining 20 percent of technical or in-class training takes place in a publicly funded college or training institutes through Alberta government funding. Should the demands of unions be met, Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry would divert public monies from publicly funded and community supported colleges and training institutes to facilities that are controlled by unions.

At one time, the majority of Alberta's construction was unionized and building trade unions virtually controlled apprenticeship. This control was exercised through representation on the Provincial Apprenticeship Board, Provincial Apprenticeship Committees for each trade and through regulations governing apprenticeship ratios including the number of journeymen required to mentor an apprentice. "Union education" was commonplace in the classroom.

The industry underwent a dramatic reversal in market in the 1980's. Currently, less than 20 percent of Alberta's construction work force is represented by a building trade union. The majority of work and apprenticeship training is being done by small to medium sized construction companies that operate on an open shop basis. In part to mitigate this loss in worker market share, building trade unions built lavish training centers, and now seek to operate them through public funds, while indenturing apprentices to their organizations.

Despite repeated efforts by some union locals to campaign, provide "union education", or recruit apprentices to join their ranks while attending technical training at public colleges and institutes, vigilance and procedures are in place to ensure the institutes and curriculum remain focused on technical training and are free of bias in terms of workplace representation issues. A major reason why industry supports apprenticeship to the extent it does is because the system is seen to be neutral. There would be significant pushback, especially from the 80 percent of non-building trade union contractors, on changes to the system that would result in worker bias. Without the support of industry, the apprenticeship system could implode.