

# Unionized labour invests in Canada

By: Sudhir Sandhu

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Geoff Dueck Thiessen, in his piece Make public-work bids truly open (June 29), leans upon common misguided and unsubstantiated assertions in arguing against the project labour agreements that are used in Manitoba's public works projects.

His organization, the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), like other non-union groups, operates on a different business model than do building trades unions (BTUs) in this country. They try to gain competitive advantage on work sites by paying lower wages and benefits. They don't invest in training and development of skilled workers, the way BTUs do across Canada.

They repeatedly offer unsubstantiated opinions that the use of union labour results in cost overruns and somehow is a contributing factor in leaving First Nations and Métis peoples out of the workforce. Dueck Thiessen is resorting to misdirection to shift focus away from the fact BTUs supply the best-trained and productive labour in the country. Repeating the same misinformed opinions will not change essential facts.

Canada as a whole faces a significant shortage of skilled labour. The only viable long-term solution to the pending skills shortage is to make sustained investments in recruitment, training and development to satisfy current and future requirements.

Union organizations, including the construction and trades unions affiliated with the Manitoba Building Trades, are at the forefront of training delivery. Most building trade unions such as those representing pipefitters, electrical workers, labourers and operating engineers, have established facilities to train apprentices and certified tradespeople. Our affiliated unions work in partnerships with unionized contractors to

look beyond the bend and make essential investments to support the Canadian economy in the future.

CLAC and other non-union organizations have nothing similar to offer. Ironically, they draw their labour supply from publicly funded trades colleges or from training institutions operated by unions. In effect, they let others bear very substantial training costs and then attempt to compete on the basis of lower cost.

Without the active engagement of building trades unions, the skill gap in the Canadian construction industry would be far worse than it already is. And if left to organizations such as the one Dueck Thiessen represents, training and development costs would simply be off-loaded to public institutions or building trades unions.

Project owners in Canada know well enough the difference in skill, experience, safety and productivity records between union and non-union organizations. That's why union labour is often considered Grade A labour, while non-union labour is deemed Grade B. For more complex and difficult work, project owners almost exclusively rely on union labour. Increasingly, project owners who experimented with non-union shops are returning to sourcing union labour.

Competitors of the union construction sector also suggest project agreements somehow prevent non-union contractors from bidding for work. That's untrue. The bidding process is open to every qualified union and non-union contractors. Successful bidders simply have to comply with standard wage and employment conditions.

These common rules preserve employment for Canadian workers, as it is more difficult to substitute them with lower-cost temporary foreign workers.

The affiliated unions of the Manitoba Building Trades and the Allied Hydro Council are proud of their work on major infrastructure projects in Manitoba. Most recently, the floodway expansion was completed on time and \$38 million under budget. (While the project benefited from a number of factors including some scope changes, labour costs were certainly not a factor as suggested by Dueck Thiessen.) This project resulted in exceptional employment gains for aboriginal and Métis workers. We're working hard to support Manitoba Hydro projects at Keeyask and Keewatinohk. We're making significant efforts to support training and development of a northern aboriginal workforce that will be an enduring legacy.

Manitoba's building trades unions are committed to providing the best-trained and most productive skilled labour to support construction projects. Our business model internalizes training and development costs rather than passing the buck to others.

Dueck Thiessen is entitled to his opinions. We believe the facts speak for themselves.

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## Analysis

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