

# BUILDING OUR SKILLED TRADES



# STRENGTHENING THE UNION



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## Message from Lana Payne, Unifor National President

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Unifor is proud to represent Skilled Trades members in more than 20 economic sectors in every province in the country. Our union is committed to improving compensation and working conditions, advancing and harmonizing industry standards, and ensuring safe, good paying Skilled Trades jobs for the future.

We have made many gains, but we also know that defending the trades requires ongoing vigilance in our workplaces and with provincial and federal governments.

As our workplaces change, including through automation and other technological advances, bargaining language to protect the trades and workplace training or upskilling is crucial. It is vital that we do not allow employers or governments to use the Skilled Trades shortage, arguably a crisis of their own making, as an opportunity to water down standards.

We know one of the ways we can strengthen the Skilled Trades and grow the labour force is by creating space in the trades for underrepresented groups, including women, young workers and workers from equity-seeking communities and by pushing our employers to do the same.

Unifor has and will continue to play a leadership role in this regard. Our union sponsors scholarships for women and contributes to projects to increase participation and provide training and access to good jobs for women and workers from equity communities in Skilled Trades.

On a personal note, I am especially proud of the work of our Skilled Trades members who give of their time and skills to make our communities better. This kind of social unionism builds our union and shows the broader community that we are committed to doing everything we can to make the world around us fairer and more equitable.

## Message from John Breslin, Unifor National Skilled Trades Director

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Skilled Trades workers are at the core of the Canadian economy.

While the pandemic proved how essential Skilled Trades workers are, it accelerated ongoing labour shortages with early retirements and even fewer apprenticeship opportunities. In fact, approximately 700,000 Skilled Trades workers will retire by

2028 and there are currently not enough apprentices to replace them.

Recruitment efforts to address this chronic shortage remain hampered by persistent misconceptions and stereotypes of the trades as well as employer unwillingness to create enough apprenticeship opportunities.

Unifor works to attract and support Skilled Trades workers, including underrepresented communities, and to encourage employers to generate more apprenticeship positions to truly alleviate the shortage.

The union supports educational outreach to help dispel myths surrounding the Skilled Trades. We believe apprenticeship must be presented as a viable third option to youth, equal to university and college as a path to a rewarding and lucrative career.

We remain committed to collective action to maintain and develop the role of the trades in our workplaces and the economy. Qualification requirements must be raised and standardized to improve employment mobility across jurisdictions, while maintaining the highest standards possible within each bonafide trade group.

We have seen employers try to erode or amalgamate trades, eliminating highly skilled workers' jobs, lowering the skill level required to perform this work and producing unsafe working conditions.

We face many challenges but there are also opportunities. Skilled Tradespeople will play a pivotal role as the post-pandemic economy adapts to new technology and shifts to green energy.

The Skilled Trades Council and our members are on the frontline defending good jobs and apprenticeship. Our priority is to ensure that our members are equipped to thrive in the new economy and to coordinate with corporations and policymakers to strengthen and grow the next generation of tradespeople.

## Unifor Skilled Trades Social Commitment Relief Work Projects



*Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans 2006/08*



*Native Canadian Centre, Toronto 2007*



*Habitat For Humanity/Grey Cup Build 2007*



*Little Salmon/Carmacks,  
Yukon 2008/09*



*Willow Place Womens Shelter,  
Winnipeg 2019*



*Hope Haven Mens Shelter, Chatham 2020*



*Merritt, British Columbia 2022*

## More than 50,000 Unifor Skilled Trades Members

From the major assembly plants to the hundreds of parts suppliers, from aircraft and aerospace plants to tool and die shops, from underground mines, railway locomotive and car repair shops, aircraft maintenance hangers, shipyards, to healthcare and retail, to pulp and paper mills, there are recognized Unifor Skilled Trades.

As electricians and millwrights, shopcraft workers and auto mechanics, as machinists, and pipefitters, Unifor Skilled Trades are strengthening their trade in the workplace and in collective agreements.

In workplaces as diverse as hospitals and shipyards, mines, electronics plants and automobile dealerships, fish processing plants and hotels, Unifor Skilled Trades workers are helping to build the union.

### *Importance in the Economy*

Skilled Trades are key to our economy. It is the technical mastery and skills that turns investment in new facilities, sophisticated equipment and machinery into effective production. It is the skills of the workforce that explains the high quality and productivity of Canadian plants and the international acclaim of industries such as auto and aerospace. This is even more important as industries retool for flexible manufacturing systems.



## *New Trades in the Union*

Over the years, mergers have added new trades groups to Unifor. With these new members has come a broader understanding of trade issues across sectors. These new Unifor members have provided an important profile for our union.

Whether it is fighting for apprentices or against regressive legislative changes such as dismantling of apprenticeship programs, or lobbying the federal government on shipbuilding programs, rail policy or trade policy Unifor speaks for Skilled Trades workers across Canada.

## *Major Trades in Unifor*

- Electrician
- Heavy Duty Mechanic
- Machinist
- Millwright, MR\*, IMM\*
- Pipefitter
- Railway Car Technician
- Tool & Die
- Vehicle Mechanic
- Welder

These groups represent about 80% of all Skilled Trades.

*\*MR is Machine Repair, IMM is Industrial Mechanic (Millwright).*



## The Trades Building the Union

Our union was born in the 30's. Skilled Trades workers, together with production workers, played a critical role in the events that led to the formation of the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) in the U.S. and shortly thereafter the first UAW local at Kelsey Wheel in Windsor, Ontario.

It was trades who provided key leadership for the wave of strikes and sit-downs in 1936 and 1937.

The Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) was founded in 1985 after the Canadian membership of the UAW decided to set up their own Canadian union. In 2013, Unifor was formed with the merger of the CAW with the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) – two of Canada's largest and most influential labour unions.

Overall, Skilled Trades workers were also pivotal in the broader struggles of the labour movement in Canada. They helped challenge management on a wide range of issues, including improved wages, shorter hours, and better working conditions.

But it was only with the creation of a union structure that cut across occupations and represented all workers in the workplace that greater progress was made. Solidarity between Skilled Trades workers and production workers provided the critical mass as well as the leadership and militancy that pushed the new industrial unions forward.

### *Nine-hour day movement*

In 1872, the Toronto Trades Assembly adopted a motion to press for the nine-hour day. There were similar actions in Sarnia, Guelph, Hamilton, Ottawa and Montreal. In each community the activists faced incredibly hostile employers. This struggle established links across communities in southern Ontario and Montreal, representing the first stage in the establishment of a Canadian labour movement.

## The Union Building the Trades

Strengthening the identity of the Skilled Trades and building solidarity within the union have gone hand in hand since the formation of Unifor.

Our union recognized the need for Skilled Trades to discuss and resolve issues. A structure unique to Canada, the Unifor Skilled Trades Council, was enshrined in the constitution.

A National Skilled Trades department was immediately established with a director appointed by the Unifor National President.

Separate Skilled Trades ratification on trades issues in collective agreements gives recognition to the particular needs of the Skilled Trades. It provides a voice for Skilled Trades members within the union.

The Chairperson of the Unifor Skilled Trades Council is a member of the National Executive Board of the union giving the trades not only a voice at the high decision making body of Unifor, but also a role in building the total union.

The union further built the trades in 1995 when the CAW established the Skilled Trades Union Education Program. No other union, nationally or internationally, has this type of program.



## Bargaining Apprenticeships in the Workplace

Apprenticeship is a tried and true way to develop the next generation of skilled workers.

Apprenticeship programs provide the opportunity for apprentices to work with tradespersons who are able to pass along many years of accumulated trade knowledge.

They are workplace based which grounds theory in the practical applications of real work situations. They are time based which provides for an opportunity to turn learning into knowledge and skill.

### *Our Union's Agenda on Apprenticeships:*

Maintaining and strengthening an effective apprenticeship program is a priority for our union. This is especially critical since many of our current Skilled Trades members will be eligible to retire over the next few years. Our union's strategy includes:

- enforcing contractual journey person to apprentice ratios;
- making sure companies continue to implement 'Unifor' apprenticeship programs;
- negotiating resources for Joint Apprenticeship Committees;
- pressuring the government to continue to fund and support apprenticeship training;
- increasing broad-based opportunities for youth to enter trades through an apprenticeship program.



## Apprenticeships under pressure across Canada

Unifor is committed to continue with campaigns in Canada against:

- creation of designer trades and/or single skilled occupations;
- encouraging short term, competency based completion of skill sets;
- removal of apprentice standards, certifications and reduction of government funding.



*Unifor Pipefitter & Apprentice*



*Unifor Electrician & Apprentice*

With Skilled Trades shortages, Unifor continues to meet with Provincial and Federal governments requesting:

- national coordination of increased apprentice opportunities in key recognizable trades;
- adequate employer and government funding to create apprenticeships;
- create Apprentice Retention Programs to ensure completion of apprenticeships;
- programs which ensure employers meet their obligations to train the next generation of Skilled Trades.

## Critical Issues

### *Technological Change:*

New technology represents both a challenge and a threat. Workplaces are becoming technologically more complex and individual pieces of equipment are becoming technically more sophisticated. There is a tension between management and government efforts to erode trades skills and union efforts to enhance and deepen trade skills. Our agenda includes negotiating:

- more opportunity for training and upgrading;
- more control over the design of technology;
- effective workplace technology committees.

### *Training:*

Skilled Trades technical training needs to be continuous and comprehensive, from education to hands on training, from regular updates and refreshers to major retraining. Our goals include:

- training programs adequately funded by employers and government;
- peer trainers and training coordinators to organize, plan, schedule and deliver programs;
- union involvement in defining needs, developing, producing and evaluating programs.

### *Operating Systems:*

Programs involving company operating systems may include the elimination of Skilled Trades classifications and shifting of maintenance trades work to production workers. Our judgment on whether or not to participate in “operating systems” is based on criteria such as:

- negotiating increased protection for Skilled Trades jobs and skills;
- gaining real influence over direction of such initiatives as predictive and preventative maintenance;
- using our influence to expand trades work into non-traditional areas.

### *Contracting/Work Ownership:*

Contracting out Skilled Trades work undermines the job security of our Skilled Trades and limits opportunities for new hires. In return for our skills and our commitment to quality and productivity we strive to establish the principles of work ownership. These are:

- we own the work inside our workplaces;
- our trades be given first priority to do the work;
- trades to be fully utilized;
- laid off Skilled Trades to be recalled back to work prior to contracting out work;
- meaningful discussions and contracting information to be provided by the employer to the union and prior to contracting.

### *Safeguarding Skills:*

Programs such as “multi-skilling” and “designer trades” erode skills and job content, and in the longer term, pose a threat to our job security. We will:

- defend the depth and breadth of our core trades to Red Seal Standards;
- resist both fragmentation and multi-skilling;
- ensure our trades and apprentices to learn and adapt to new processes and technology.

### *Work Time:*

Unifor continually strives to bargain shorter work times. Reducing work time:

- protects existing jobs and creates new jobs while, ensuring adequate Skilled Trades replacements;
- promotes a balance between work and family and leisure time;
- creates more work opportunities for young people.

## Unifor Skilled Trades Structures

### *Building on our past gains and union structures for the future*

- Formation of CAW in 1985 from the UAW, formation of Unifor in 2013, from CAW and CEP
- Unifor Skilled Trades Council
- Skilled Trades National Department with National Director and Staff
- Separate ratification voting procedures for Skilled Trades
- Skilled Trades Advisory Board and Comprehensive Skilled Trades Policy Manual
- Skilled Trades representation in the workplace, at bargaining and on the National Executive Board since 1994
- Skilled Trades Collective Bargaining and New Technology Conference

### *Unifor Skilled Trades Collective Bargaining and New Technology Conference*

Every three years, delegates to the conference set out Skilled Trades policy and goals for negotiations. The conference reviews new technologies coming into our workplaces and develops strategies to use these technologies to strengthen the Skilled Trades and apprenticeship training.



## *Unifor Skilled Trades Council*

Unifor Skilled Trades Council is composed of area sub-councils across Canada each of which takes turns hosting its quarterly meetings. Membership dues to the council are one-half an hour's pay per year with 60% going to support area sub-councils and 40% to the Council. The Council plays an important role in providing a voice for Skilled Trades and apprentices.

## *Representation on the NEB*

As embedded in the Unifor Constitution, the Chairperson of the Unifor National Skilled Trades Council is a member of the Unifor National Executive Board (NEB). The NEB is one of the highest authorities in our union.

## *Skilled Trades Department*

Department staff provide resources and support in collective bargaining, contract enforcement, arbitration, apprenticeship training programs and participate on government and industry committees. Active Board members of Canadian Apprenticeship Forum and Skilled Trades Ontario.

## *The Unifor Journeyperson Card*

Holders of the Unifor Journeyperson Card have completed an apprenticeship up to Unifor standards, or have worked at least eight years at their trade, as set out under Unifor standards in the Policy. Journeyperson card holders are eligible for preferential employment opportunities.

## *Separate Ratification Vote*

Separate ratification vote for Skilled Trades was initially achieved in 1957 and was included in the first Unifor Constitution.



## UNIFOR SKILLED TRADES AT WORK



[uniforskilledtrades.ca](http://uniforskilledtrades.ca)

For additional information about Unifor Skilled Trades

Email: [trades@unifor.org](mailto:trades@unifor.org)

**Produced by the Unifor National Skilled Trades Department**



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