

NEED FOR ORGANIZATION OF THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY IN CANADA*

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AS I see it, the chief objects for having any Canadian association of construction industries are (1) to reduce the difficulties that surround those engaged in our industry,—contractors and supply men; (2) to improve the practices that are current between us; (3) to fix standards such as many can readily call to mind, and which can be fairly and uniformly applied throughout the country; (4) to facilitate the movement and employment of labor; and, finally, if possible, to work out some sort of a plan which will help in the production of building materials and bring it up to the great need which exists at the present time.

Why all these? It seems to me that we should bear in mind at all times that we are anxious to improve the position of our chosen industry in the business and financial world. Business, outside of our own industry, has in the past treated contractors more or less as a joke, and finance, as represented by the banks, has put us almost at the bottom of the ladder. These two conditions certainly are improving, but there is a great deal of room for further improvement. Contracting is something like stock gambling,—the few successful ones ultimately fail unless they retire at the opportune moment. That has been the history of the contractors of Canada and it is up to us to so improve conditions in order to ensure that that kind of thing shall not continue.

Eliminate "Cut-Throat" Practices

How can this be done? I have been talking of why, but now the question is: How can it be done? There is only one thing for it, as I see it. In the first place, it should be the duty of all of us engaged in the industry to help the honest, straightforward and legitimate contractor and material man and to make it difficult for the unsound firm, lacking either in experience or strong financial condition, to engage in the business. Make the industry, if possible, one that would be entered into by worthy men, and worthy men alone. Certainly we cannot accomplish this end by the usual underhand and so-called cut-throat practices of the past; certainly not by the free-for-all, or every-man-for-himself disorganized industry which has prevailed hitherto.

What is needed in order to attain the end desired? We need to increase efficiency, to lower costs and if possible to establish for our industry regular and steady earnings. After all, we must always look to that end if we are to be successful. We can no longer localize our organizations. The operations of all the larger general contractors, trade contractors, supply houses and building material manufacturing concerns cover many cities and towns, several provinces and, in some instances, the whole Dominion. Provincialism, therefore, is not the basis for our organization as I see it. Even the east and the west are disappearing, and Canada is our field. If organization has any value to the broadminded business man, it must be Dominion-wide, it must be centralized and efficient and it must be properly founded and sufficiently financed.

Employers Must Organize

Does our own employe, the worker in stone, marble, concrete, brick or tile, wood or metal, leave it to George, or does he get under his union? Does he centralize authority and does he obey its mandate and pay the price? The answer to this question is evident on all hands. If there was one thing that impressed me more than another at that National Industrial Conference in Ottawa, it was the fact that opposite those employers of labor were an equivalent number of employes, and every man who was on the other side of the house was a paid employe of organized labor.

*Excerpts from presidential address at Ottawa Conference, February 3rd, 1920.

Gentlemen, that spoke volumes to me; it made me feel that any industry, or that which calls itself an industry, is not worthy of being held high in the esteem of the community that is not prepared to some extent to counteract that great movement and to pay the necessary price.

Is it worth while to endeavor to accomplish all this? What are some of the real benefits and what are some of the unseen advantages. In the first place, I maintain that the fraternity that one has with his competitors is worth the price in itself; in fact, nothing has given me more satisfaction or pleasure than the acquaintanceship of men who are engaged in the same line of business, or the opportunity to discuss their problems, difficulties and troubles, and to compare results with those whose calling is the same as my own. To me it is worth the price in itself.

Fraternity Leads to Co-operation

This fraternity leads to the second point and that is co-operation of effort. There must be co-operation where there is the proper kind of fraternity. Co-operation in itself will lead, by the comparison of experience and notes, to increased efficiency in methods of doing business, and increased efficiency in methods will certainly lead in the direction of stabilizing our industry,—stabilizing our own particular business and stabilizing the business of those with whom we come in contact. As a result of that we will be in a position to render the service which the country really demands that we should render.

It sometimes bothers me a great deal, when I take time to dwell upon it, to reflect how little service this great industry really renders collectively to the community as a whole. We should bear in mind that, being the second largest industry in Canada, something is demanded of us. If we are able to render that service I think you will all agree with me that we will obtain something from our business,—the thing to which we give our life and our time. We will obtain a considerably greater amount of satisfaction and the net result will be a measure of success not obtainable in any other way. This can only be done by the best and busiest men being willing to give a little time and by all supporting their association. Shall we have it? What form shall it take? Shall it be a federation of separate bodies or an organized whole with autonomous sections and sub-sections. Shall it be based on the organized district or shall it come up from the organized district, from the provincial organization and into the federal organization; or shall it come direct from the organized district to the federal, with a group of local districts in the provinces for provincial matters?

Will we support it with our time and our funds? Unless we are prepared to give it some time and consider it a part of our business, and unless we are prepared to support it financially, it can never be the success it should be and it can never render the service to us that we desire.

Financing Presents a Problem

My question, and I am sure the question that you put to each other, is: Are we prepared and are our confreres at home prepared and willing to back us if we organize this association on a sound basis. We should bear in mind that this construction industry, no matter what part of it we are engaged in, after all is our chosen life-work and demands the very best we can put into it. If we do that, Canada will ultimately receive our help and support.

There is the question of the method of financing our organization and of whether we shall maintain a permanent office and secretary; the question of whether it is possible to establish standard wages in various parts of the country and the question of the length of time that our agreements with labor should be made, whether they should be short-terms agreements or long. We will all admit that trade agreements with unions must be based on equity. Are we ready to adopt the principle that these wage agreements shall be made upon the basis that the wages shall be variable with the cost of living? That is now the case in some localities. Is it possible to compete at the present time for contract work, and to what length would we recommend