

APPRENTICES GETTING YOUNGER

AVERAGE AGE OF PLUMBERS AND STEAMFITTERS IS DROPPING

Recognizing the need to replenish the skills required to service the heavy industries of Chemical Valley, large union locals such as Steamfitters and Plumbers UA Local 663 have developed aggressive recruitment and apprenticeship programs.

"We currently have 110 apprentices in the system and another 44 have passed the initial screening and testing stage and are on a waiting list," says Ross Tius, Business Manager of Local 663. "The average age of our apprentices is now about 22-24 and that's down sharply from the average age of 27-28 in just a few years. In fact, the influx of the youth movement has also impacted on the average age of our overall active membership, dropping it to 40 from 48 over the past five years." Of the total membership of 1,010 in Local 663, there are 786 active steamfitters, welders, plumbers and apprentices.

Tius says the Plumbers and Steamfitters, along with other skilled trades in the Sarnia-Lambton area, have attempted to counter the aging workforce demographics of the region by directly targeting secondary school graduates as prime candidates for careers in the skilled trades. Union participation in skilled trades fairs and other informational programs has helped to stimulate interest in the apprenticeship programs which combine practical training with educational programs offered by institutions such as George Brown College in Toronto for steamfitters and Fanshawe College in London for plumbers.

"We canvas for young, ambitious kids who have the talent to complete all the apprenticeship requirements and the desire to be a credit to our craft," Tius says. "Ultimately, the toughest test they will have to face is meeting the requirements of the heavy industry of Chemical Valley, where both contractors and industry clients have tended to demand high level skills."

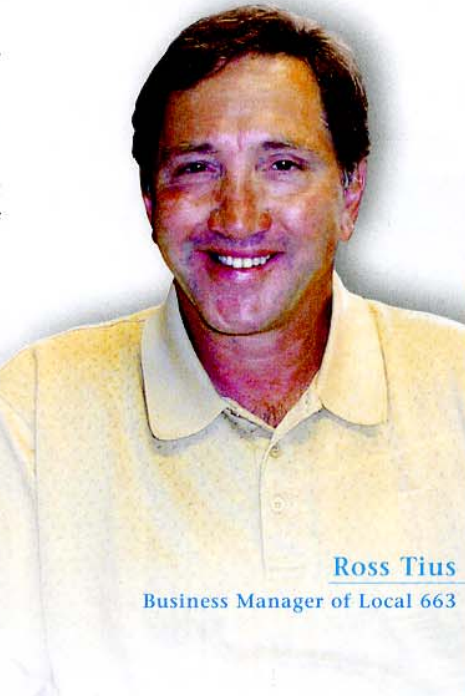
An active member of the local since 1968, Tius is a certified steamfitter. Although he has spent most of his career in Sarnia-Lambton, he honed his skills on major industrial projects across Canada. He says new apprentices are faced with changes in technology that require ongoing training to be part of the job.

Prospective steamfitter and plumber apprentices are required to achieve a standing of 75% on externally monitored three-hour aptitude testing. The test includes math, mechanical aptitude, spatial, communication, written and oral skill components. Apprenticeship candidates must also complete a 22-week blueprint and isometrics course.

Apprenticeship combines hands-on experience with formal education. "When we place an individual into a workplace, we evaluate that person's performance on a regular basis," Tius says. "Following a probationary period they then enter into a contract with our joint membership council, our local and the Apprenticeship Branch of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. They take on three terms at school for basic, intermediate and advanced programs and a 5,000-hour apprenticeship that goes along with that."

While the union local measures the success of its recruitment program in its ability to draw increasing numbers of new applicants directly from secondary school, it also recognizes the vagaries of the marketplace.

"We understand the concern of industry that age demographics are leading to a shortage of skills but our local isn't experiencing that," Tius says. "There are currently 200 plus applicants who come forward to join our local. If we could control the work pattern and guarantee continued work in Chemical Valley, there would be no end to membership drive here."



Ross Tius
Business Manager of Local 663

ON SAFETY PERFORMANCE

Despite the inherent risks of working in a petrochemical environment, Tius describes Sarnia-Lambton and Chemical Valley as the safest workplace in North America. To be accepted by clients and contractors for project work in a chemical environment, tradespeople must adhere to stringent safe work practices and regular safety audits. Years of focus on the issue have yielded global recognition of Sarnia-Lambton as a world leader in the area of safety and minimal lost-time injuries.

Unionized plumbers and steamfitters are required to receive safety training specific to Chemical Valley worksites. To be permitted to work at the plants, tradespeople must have received safety training and be certified by the Industrial Education Co-operative. Courses are also offered by the Construction Safety Association of Ontario. Local 663 promotes upgrade courses on welding, fabrication and instrumentation that also emphasize the safety aspects of that training.

ON SKILLS EXCELLENCE

"We have a great labour pool resource here." Tius says, referring to the high standards required by Chemical Valley clients. "In fabrication, for example, local shops are well known for their skills in alloy welding and the use of high technology in welding procedures."

By far the pipefitters and the boilermakers have the great abundance of welders and members of the Mechanical Contractors Association of Sarnia are assured of getting the skills they need locally during busy construction periods.

These skills are also exportable. During late 2000, 132 skilled welders and steamfitters from Sarnia-Lambton were transported to Milford, Connecticut for 18 months of work on the huge Milford Power project. They worked on the project in co-operation with affiliate UA Local 777 in Connecticut. Sarnia tradespeople were pre-tested locally and also tested again in Connecticut for certification there.


ON STAYING COMPETITIVE IN THE COMMERCIAL SECTOR

For many years, the heavy industry of Chemical Valley kept local tradespeople well employed. "They swallowed up all the manpower requirements and basically provided a good lifestyle that nurtured a very healthy union membership here," Tius says. "But it left us with a big void on the institutional and commercial side of our business – the hospitals, schools and government building projects." To "get back into the game", he says, the plumbers and steamfitters established an enhancement or stabilization fund in 2000 to level the playing field for unionized and non-union workers. Individual members contribute 75 cents of their hourly wages to the fund.

Funding provided by union members themselves enables mechanical contractors to bid competitively on selected commercial and institutional projects. "We try to co-operate with the unionized contractors when they come to us for financial aid and specialized manpower

requirements. If we can help to make them more competitive in the bidding process, everybody wins."

Tius says unionized steamfitters and plumbers have steadily picked up more commercial and institutional project work over the past three years through co-operation with large and small members of the Mechanical Contractors Association. "By expanding the commercial side of their business, the smaller shops are making a living and they are employing and continue to employ our plumbers and apprentices."

While industrial projects remain the core business for contractors and the tradespeople who work for them, commercial and institutional projects such as the upcoming Lambton Hospitals Group construction project are also important to the trades. "We're excited about this hospital project and will work with our contractors to be part of it. For our members, it's important to be a visible part of this community." 

We've got the Power to service all of Sarnia-Lambton

ECAS
ELECTRICAL CONTRACTORS
ASSOCIATION OF SARNIA

B & B Enterprises
Brogden Electrical Contractors
C & C Enterprises
Christopher Electric
Comstock Canada Ltd.

DMW Electrical
Jacobs Catalytic Ltd.
Mellon Enterprises
Nisbet-Bazeley Elec.
Tee-Jay Instrumentation



P.O. Box 545 - 954 Upper Canada Drive, Sarnia, Ontario N7T 7J4