

June, 2007

TRAINING UPDATE

Employment Insurance and Training

In the early 1990's what was then called *Unemployment Insurance* was, arguably, misused. The federal government was faced with what was the worst recession in decades, if not a depression. Unemployment was high, especially in construction. So, Unemployment Insurance was used as means of minimizing the effects of unemployment. UI, often called in those days "pogey," was used to pay for many training programs and to support trainees while they attended training programs.

Unemployed workers who had run out of benefits were given extensions if they were attending an approved training program. Even after the rules changed, later in the decade, Local 506 members often called the Training Centre to ask if there was a training program they could sign up for so they could continue to collect UI.

Then, as part of the effort to reduce the deficit, the government changed the name to Employment Insurance and changed to rules to restrict the claims on the fund, in a manner which could be called drastic. It became harder to qualify. There are no extensions with EI. EI continued to be used, as UI had been, to support apprenticeship training, but even getting that support became more difficult.

Unions, the Canadian Labour Congress and the Canadian Federation of Labour (which no longer exists) protested as the amount collected in Employment Insurance contributions was considerably more than the amount paid out in benefits. The government was using workers' contributions to pay down its deficit.

One problem, which is still with us, is that it is very difficult for workers collecting benefits to attend training programs. The unemployed have to be available for work and are supposed to be looking for work, not upgrading their skills – even though upgraded skills might result in increased employability.

Technological change, new equipment and materials, new methods of construction, new requirement for construction like green or energy-efficient buildings – all these mean that skills must be upgraded. But for most journeypersons in the trades, attending training programs means sacrificing income.

The provincial government, through a recently-announced Skills Training Infrastructure Program, is encouraging investment in new and upgraded equipment for training centres. We hope to participate in this program. It will mean many opportunities for Journeyperson Upgrading and for improved Apprenticeship training. Especially for Journeyperson Upgrading, it would be much easier to conduct training if workers, at least while they're out of work, could attend without endangering their EI benefits.