

Stakeholders split on apprenticeship ratio reform

Don Wall October 31, 2018



Supporters are hailing Premier Doug Ford's government's decision to simplify Ontario's trades apprenticeship ratio system as a game-changer for the construction sector that will expand business opportunities and create thousands of new entry-level jobs in the trades.

Opponents, however, are warning the adoption of a 1:1 journeyperson-to-apprentice ratio across all trades will unleash untrained workers into workplaces, creating unsafe conditions, and charge the move is really just a mechanism to provide contractors with cheap labour.

"This is a great day for Ontario's skilled workers and employers," said Sean Reid, vice-president and Ontario regional director for the Progressive Contractors Association (PCA).

Immediately following the Oct. 23 introduction of the new Making Ontario Open for Business Act, PCA announced that several of its member employers had pledged to hire apprentices: Arthur Electric of Milton, Ont. promised to hire up to six, Cynergy Mechanical Limited in Etobicoke said it was adding five new employees, and Beckett Electrical of North York said it would hire five to eight apprentices.

Clive Thurston, president of the Ontario General Contractors Association (OGCA), praised the reform as opening up the apprenticeship system and giving more young people opportunities to participate.

“The apprenticeship ratio change is dramatic and something that has been sought for some time and should have a very positive effect on our ability to hire somebody and get them into the industry,” said Thurston.

A journeyman can’t keep an eye constantly on an apprentice because he still has to do his job

— **Dave Gardner**

Heat and Frost Insulators Local 95

Critics such as Dave Gardner, business manager with the Heat and Frost Insulators Local 95, Patrick Dillon, business manager of the Provincial Building Trades and John Grimshaw, executive secretary treasurer with the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers council in Ontario, said the ratio decision was based on ideology, not evidence, with no consultation with trade union stakeholders.

“I would like to see the report where they came to the conclusion that 1:1 is where they need to go,” said Gardner.

“Where did they get the information from? From owner clients? Owner clients do not want people to be hurt on their jobsites. If you are flooding the jobsite with 100 fresh faces, that is a huge impact to the owner client, because now he has apprentices with no clue what’s going on, no health and safety training. A journeyman can’t keep an eye constantly on an apprentice because he still has to do his job.”

Among the organizations issuing statements praising the legislation were the Residential Construction Council of Ontario, the Council of Ontario Construction Associations (COCA), the Ontario Electrical League (OEL), Merit Ontario, Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance (OSTA), Colleges Ontario and the Ontario Home Builders’ Association.

“This new bill will see hundreds if not thousands of young Ontarians start work in the skilled trades in the near future,” said OEL president Stephen Sell. His association conducted a survey of 127 of its members this summer that indicated 73 per cent would hire new apprentices if the apprenticeship ratio mandated by the Ontario College of Trades was eased.

This is reducing the barriers to entry into the trade

— **Patrick McManus**

Ontario Skilled Trades Alliance

The current ratio structure for electricians is 1:1 for the first through fourth apprentices — meaning there has to be one journeyman on the job for each apprentice — then three additional journeymen required for a fifth apprentice, six more for the next and three more for a seventh.

There are currently 33 trades subject to the ratios. Many are already at 1:1. Carpenters and insulators are both 1:1 then 3:1.

“This is reducing the barriers to entry into the trades,” said OSTA’s Patrick McManus. “There are a lot of people interested in getting into the trades and there are a lot of employers interested in hiring them but because of the way apprenticeship ratios were set up, they couldn’t hire them.”

Besides the changes to the apprenticeship ratios, the new legislation contains provisions to eliminate the College of Trades, roll back the planned \$15 per hour increase in the minimum wage and undo worker benefits and improvements to working conditions contained in the Liberals’ Bill 148.

In announcing the legislation, Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities Merrilee Fullerton said one in five new jobs in the next five years will be in the trades.

“But in Ontario today, employers can’t find apprentices and apprentices can’t find jobs,” she said. “As far as we’re concerned, if you are prepared to do the work then you deserve a shot at the job.”

Commented Dillon, “It would appear that the government is listening to people that have the absolute worst track record in apprenticeships in the province, from training and retention and completion rate standards, and their safety record is abysmal.”

Grimshaw called the employers’ claims of more hiring “a shell game.” Employers will simply replace high-paid journeymen with low-paid apprentices, he said.

“You’ve got to ask yourself, why do they need to hire four more apprentices? Why doesn’t he hire four more journeymen? And the answer is, for the most part, they won’t hire four more journeymen because they don’t want to pay the rate.”

Dillon, McManus, David Frame of the OGCA and COCA’s Ian Cunningham all called for the Ford government to undertake consultation and research to ensure the trade skills gap is properly addressed.

“I am not sure this is a silver-bullet, quick fix for addressing the skills gap,” said Cunningham, COCA president. “I am not sure that for every trade in which there is a looming shortage there are people lined up at the door to get people into the skilled trades. So there is a good deal of promotion that has to be done to encourage young people to look at the trades seriously as a first-choice career option.”

“We are going to tell the government that they have to take an active role in recognizing the skills crisis that we are in and take a leading role in coordinating all aspect of the process including the educational system to deal with it,” said Frame.

The IBEW Ontario council and the Electrical Contractors Association of Ontario, partners in a Joint Electrical Promotion Plan, issued a joint statement calling for the Ontario government to ensure proper training and certification of electrical workers.