

# When It Works, It REALLY Works

*Win-win stories of labor management cooperation in British Columbia.*

By Cairine Caughill

**BRITISH COLUMBIA'S SHEET METAL INDUSTRY** has stayed fairly steady lately. “We’ve weathered the economic storm a little better than some areas,” says Jim Paquette, business manager of SMART local 280. “There is mining, for example. Our industrial segment has picked up recently.”

It helps to be ready for such opportunities. “The membership is trained really well,” Paquette claims. “So they’ve been able to move from one area that’s cooling off into another that’s hotter.”

“Readiness” has also been a theme for labor and management in the province. They’ve crafted creative win-win solutions that allow the contractors to be more competitive and keep union members working.

### Communication that goes two ways

Neil Deppiese, president of Horizon Metal Systems, is a member of the local SMACNA-SMART joint conference board. “You’ve got five owners sitting around with six union guys, and you’re finding ways to work within the four-year agreement,” he explains.

“Everybody throws different ideas out there and nobody takes offense. It may be odd, but we talk—and we do actually come up with things.”

Adds Bruce Sychuk, SMACNA-BC’s executive director: “It’s what we do on a day-to-day basis. We look at things as an industry, not ‘us vs. them’.”

A similar relationship exists between SMART local 276 (covering Vancouver Island) and VISMCA (Vancouver Island Sheet Metal Contractors Association), according to Mark Curtis, business manager.

“It’s just part of doing business nowadays. The nice part is we’ve reached a point where contractors feel comfortable enough that they can pick up the phone and say, ‘Hey, here’s what I’m attempting to do. This is what I want to do.’”

Curtis doesn’t always say yes. “But there’s no wall between us. A lot of times we look at it and we go, ‘Yeah, we can do something. We can try to make it work.’ At the end of the day, all I’m trying to do is put my guys to work.”

Concrete examples of how B.C.’s labor-management cooperation works:

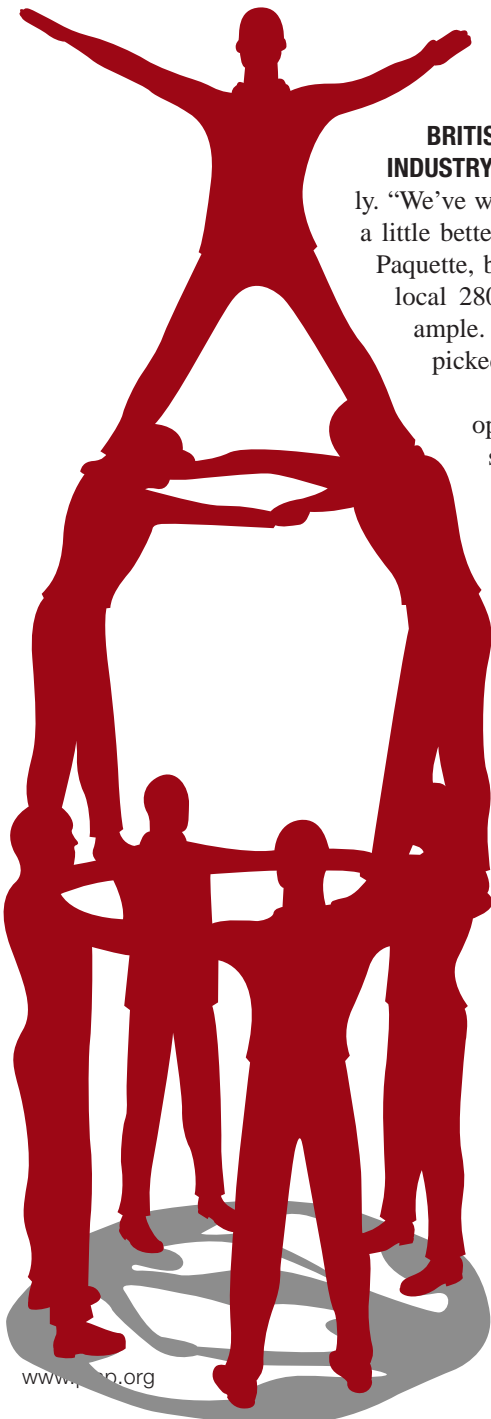
### 1. Helicopter base, Vancouver Island

Curtis wanted a union contractor to win here—a large, high-profile job. Additionally, the timing was good on his end. “When we looked at jobs coming out and timing, it would just fit. It was a really good space-filler for hours for us. In this case, SMART helped out using market recovery funds and giving the contractor a couple of extra apprentices for the job.

### 2. Architectural project, Fort Nelson, B.C.

“The client had certain conditions regarding hours of work and rates of pay,” Paquette recalls. “Work-

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## ECONOMY

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ing with the contractor that had been invited to bid the project, we were able to come up with a workable solution that modified overtime rates of pay with minimal effect on the membership. We also changed travel provisions so that the members were flown back home every two weeks for a rest break.”

### 3. Adjusting travel requirements

One contractor needed to win the job of roofing a new Walmart store (set to be built in Campbell River)—to have work over the winter. “Travel was becoming an issue. He can’t be competitive using our current travel arrangements,” Curtis says.

“The plan was—I’ll meet with my guys, and the contractor. The question was: ‘Hey, what are we going to do here? We’ve got some choices.’ We can either sit home and be unemployed . . . or we can maybe make a few less bucks a day—and get the work.”

Bottom line: With a combination of Market Recovery Funds and no travel pay, the contractor was able to succeed—and Curtis’s members had work for most of the winter. ■

*Caughill is a writer based in Ontario, Canada.*

### **If the proof is in the pudding, pick up a spoon:**

Before starting the labor-management partnership, the unionized sheet metal industry on the mainland of British Columbia (Local 280/SMACNA BC) had 29 percent of the market share.

***Today, estimates put that number at around 80 percent!***

## How Contractor Apollo Benefits

When Apollo Sheet Metal sought a large hospital project in Fort St. John—more than 900 miles north of its company HQ (Coquitlam, B.C.)—it was obvious that travel (and additional expenses) would need to be factored in.

However, Apollo’s costs could be reduced if local people were put to work on the project.

“Through organizing, we were able to locate some new members in the area to help them offset their costs,” reports Jim Paquette, business manager of SMART local 280. “Apollo didn’t have to send as many people out, put them up in hotels, and provide living-out expenses. That was beneficial to them.”

Perhaps what’s more important, Paquette points out, is that Apollo’s executives “were comfortable giving us their requirements. They were comfortable with the people that we were able to find.”

Another Apollo project—a residential high-rise tower in Vancouver—is “the crown jewel of success” for cooperation, according to Paul Daniels, shop foreman at Apollo Sheet Metal. Daniels, a member of local 280’s executive board, is also a pension plan trustee.

Why such a royal rating? Daniels says the project sticks in his mind partly because it happened in the B.C. partnership’s early days. “We were getting beat up pretty good by the non-union, and by allowing a

flexible work week—Monday to Friday, Tuesday to Saturday—to help with the concrete schedule, we basically took the market back.”