

NS - Open Mind 2011 Article

Nothing unites a group of people like a shared passion to reach a common goal. This is especially true when that goal is preserving your livelihood and ability to provide for your family and community.

That's why Merit Contractors Association of Nova Scotia was formed – and the reason it continues to be an essential voice for open shop contractors in this province.

In 1993, the Supreme Court of Nova Scotia rendered a judgment known as the Steen decision. It mandated that any general contractor with a bargaining relationship with even just one union would be required to hire only union subcontractors. This far-reaching decision by the courts had the potential to dramatically reduce the competitiveness of open shops and even force some companies out of business.

The need to oppose the Steen decision mobilized a group of open shop firms to come together to form an organization originally called The Right to Work. We held demonstrations at the Nova Scotia Department of Labour, lobbied government officials and presented our case to various government agencies. Thanks to these tireless efforts, we were able to have the Steen decision overturned by legislation in 1994, giving Nova Scotia's contractors the right to hire both union and non-union workers on their construction sites.

Our original group realized that we needed to continue working together to preserve the rights and abilities of open shops in this province. We formalized our relationship that same year and Right to Work became Merit Contractors Association of Nova Scotia – offering benefits and other services that would help give our members the ability to compete on a level playing field with unionized shops.

Today, Merit Contractors Association of Nova Scotia has grown to include over 135 companies, representing around 1,600 employees. In addition to acting as a leading voice for many firms in Nova Scotia's construction industry, we offer our members safety training, apprenticeships, skills development training, a scholarship program, retirement planning and competitive medical benefits. We're proud of our ability to deliver these services, as well as provide a network through which members can find new opportunities to grow their businesses.

Despite these accomplishments, we recognize that we can't rest on our laurels – and this past year proved it. In November 2010, the Nova Scotia government introduced a new labour law, Bill 100, which would force unionized organizations to subcontract solely to other unionized contractors. It would have also shut out the vast majority of private sector employers from having a voice on future changes to labour laws in this province and make it tougher for Nova Scotia's governments to find cost-saving solutions through the private sector.

Once again, Merit came forward to speak on behalf of Nova Scotia's open shop contractors. Through partnerships with our allies and opposition parties that listened to our concerns, we convinced the government to change key portions of Bill 100 before it became law.

Regardless of this success, it reinforces the important role that Merit plays in this province. In addition to developing human resources programs for our members and building a strong relationship with our other Merit Associations in Canada, the Nova Scotia chapter will continue to fight for the rights of open shop contractors and give them a strong voice in decisions that affect their livelihood. Through our work, we are standing up to ensure a strong future for our members and their employees.

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