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# BUILDING BETTER

The positive impact of community benefits agreements on the B.C. construction workforce

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## **Building better**

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# Summary

British Columbia has experienced a continuing shortage of skilled construction workers. Over half of its apprentices fail to complete their program and an alarming number of workers leave the industry due to the precarious nature of the work and its toxic worksite culture, a concern of particular significance for Indigenous workers, women and racialized workers.

This paper examines how, in its capacity as a construction employer, British Columbia Infrastructure Benefits (BCIB) has used a community benefits agreement (CBA) to build a better construction workforce in B.C. by investing in training, prioritizing local employment and making its workforce more representative of the province's population. From 2019 to the end of 2024, it has hired 4,946 workers. They have logged over 7.5 million paid hours, making it the second largest provincial construction employer.

An analysis of BCIB's payroll-based equity database, unique in the industry, reveals that between 2019 and 2024:

- 20 per cent of BCIB's workforce have been trainees or apprentices.
- 14 percent of BCIB's employees have been Indigenous, more than double the six percent provincial construction average.
- 92 per cent of BCIB's employees have been B.C. residents, 76 per cent of whom are from communities where its projects are located.
- 9 per cent of BCIB's employees have been women, a rate one-and-a-half times higher than the provincial construction average.
- 25 per cent of the women hired have been Indigenous.

- 21 per cent of BCIB's employees have been rehired to work on its other projects.

The CBA with BC's construction unions means that all workers on BCIB's payroll are unionized and receive the same pay for their classification, regardless of the contractor to whom BCIB assigns them. This ensures that Indigenous workers, women and other vulnerable workers are compensated fairly. The CBA also guarantees that all workers get paid, eliminating the problem of non-payment of wages experienced by many construction workers while preventing the exploitation of undocumented workers from construction's underground economy.

BCIB's two-day respectful onsite initiative (ROI) is designed to address the toxic worksite environment that makes it so difficult for Indigenous workers, women and other vulnerable workers to remain in the industry. The government has directed it to incorporate BC's 2019 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in how it carries out its mandate. Creating a more welcoming—and supportive—culture on building sites contributes to making work more satisfying and encourages workers to pursue a career in construction. BCIB also ensures that all its workers have completed safety training and that its worksites comply with Worksafe BC's accident prevention guidelines.

BCIB's role as a construction employer has been controversial. This is because the contractors who obtain work on its provincial infrastructure projects must use the unionized workers BCIB dispatches to them as a condition of their construction contracts with the province. While they supervise the workforce, contractors are not the employers and they must respect the CBA in exercising their supervisory functions. However, contractors are entitled, under the CBA, to ask BCIB to hire and dispatch their choice of workers to their job sites, ensuring that they have access to a core group of workers in whom they have confidence. Once their requests are fulfilled, BCIB is able to hire other qualified workers according to a rank order set out in the CBA. This is what enables it to fulfill its mandate to diversify the workforce.

BCIB provides many services to contractors on its 10 major projects. It is responsible for managing labour relations and finding qualified workers to meet the staffing requirements of contractors on its worksites. BC has faced ongoing labour shortages, so this latter service is particularly valuable, especially to smaller contractors without a comprehensive knowledge of BC, or local, labour markets. BCIB manages the payroll for all the workers contractors supervise and handles the statutory payments, including EI and CPP, reducing their administrative burden. It also

carries out targeted research on the future labour requirements of major provincial infrastructure projects which it shares with contractors on its projects. Through these various initiatives, it is addressing the industry's critical staffing, apprenticeship and training needs.

BCIB's support for training and apprenticeship, its efforts to retain skilled workers in the industry by promoting employment continuity through rehiring workers, and its focus on local employment, enabling people to find jobs in their own community, represents a long-term investment in the industry's workforce. Its efforts to improve the workplace culture on building sites differentiates it from the narrower, production-oriented mainstream industry, which pays far too little attention to the lived experience of construction workers. Improving on-the-job workplace experience is a legitimate—but too often overlooked—public policy objective; one that encourages workers to stay in the industry.

BCIB is unique. It is the only example of a government creating a public employer to train, employ and supply the trades' workforce on major construction projects in Canada. Thus far, it has largely succeeded in meeting the government's ambitious mandate, as its comprehensive data base confirms. It also provides a positive example of how to address some of the industry's key challenges which, arguably, deserve wider attention.

# Introduction

In creating British Columbia Infrastructure Benefits (BCIB) in 2018, a newly elected provincial government sought to tackle the construction industry's chronic skills shortages through a progressive workforce training and employment strategy. This prioritized local jobs, apprenticeships and employment equity. It sought to address the toxic workplace culture that has contributed to B.C.'s high labour turnover. Creating BCIB and negotiating a Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) with the construction unions also gained labour's support for its innovative workforce renewal program.<sup>1</sup>

This initiative departs significantly from traditional public construction procurement. BCIB is now the employer of the entire construction trades workforce on selected major infrastructure projects valued at over \$500 million. The government amended its procurement contracts to require contractors to source their trades labour from the new Crown corporation. To standardize wages and benefits across its projects and prevent contractors poaching skilled trades from one another, the government negotiated a multi-project collective agreement with the Allied Infrastructure and Related Construction Council of British Columbia (AIRCC), representing 19 construction unions. The government then made BCIB the employer referenced in the CBA that it negotiated with the building trades unions.<sup>2</sup> The CBA enabled BCIB—with the agreement of the unions—to prioritize local hire, training, apprenticeships, and recruitment of Indigenous workers, women, racialized workers and people with disabilities. It ensured that all workers would be unionized, paid the appropriate rate for their job classification and covered by the collective agreement (AIRCC and BCIB 2018).

The CBA resembles project labour agreements (PLAs), which are widespread in construction.<sup>3</sup> These unionize an entire project for its duration in return for unions supplying the skilled trades' workforce and agreeing to a no-strike, no lock-out clause. However, it differs significantly from them because BCIB, not the contractors, is the workforce employer. This is the key difference. As the employer, BCIB can hire, train and dispatch workers to its job sites, paralleling a union hiring hall. However, BCIB must do so according to the terms of the CBA. Contractors winning bids on public procurement contracts still organize, direct and supervise workers on their projects and are responsible for workplace safety. But they are no longer the employers. They must use the workers that BCIB sends to them. They must also supervise in a manner that respects the terms and conditions of the CBA. BCIB, in turn, must ensure that the workers it provides are qualified to perform the work contractors require.

Initially, BCIB's 2018 mandate covered three projects, each valued at over half a billion dollars: the \$730 million project to widen the TransCanada Highway, the \$2.9 billion Broadway Subway Extension Project and the \$1.4 billion Pattullo Bridge replacement. It has since added the \$1.5 billion Cowichan hospital and a major upgrade to the campus of the British Columbia Institute of Technology. As of late 2024, it includes 10 major infrastructure projects.<sup>4</sup>

# Building on a significant precedent

From 1994 to 2001, a previous NDP provincial government had implemented a similar, although more modest, program on a major Vancouver Island highway. It established a publicly owned corporation, Highway Constructors Limited (HCL), to employ the construction workforce. HCL negotiated an agreement with 13 highway construction trades unions to secure their cooperation in supplying the skilled workforce it required and support its employment equity, training and apprenticeship programs.<sup>5</sup>

The government included commitments in the agreement to diversify the workforce and address discrimination against women, Indigenous Peoples and racialized workers—discrimination that was widespread in the industry at the time.<sup>6</sup> The agreement enabled HCL to hire, train and dispatch local residents and members of designated equity groups to its work sites. Labour accepted these provisions because the entire project was unionized.<sup>7</sup>

A key feature of this earlier initiative was the establishment of a major training program. Its purpose was to encourage local residents and members of four provincially designated equity groups (women, Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities and racialized people) to qualify for work on the project. This was accompanied by a widespread advertising program in communities on Vancouver Island, informing them of the training program and the possibility of work on the project.

Assessments of the initiative were positive. Economist Marjorie Cohen and tradesperson Kate Braid examined the project's performance and



concluded that it had dramatically increased employment of the targeted equity groups. At the time, fewer than two per cent of women had on-site jobs, while Indigenous workers were generally excluded from the industry. In contrast, equity participation in HCL's project reached 22.1 per cent by 1998. Fully 93 per cent of HCL's payroll went to local residents, making it popular with island residents and local businesses.<sup>8</sup> Many workers achieved qualifications as construction labourers, operating engineers and teamsters.<sup>9</sup>

However, the NDP lost the 2001 election. Gordon Campbell's Liberal government was hostile to the building trades' unions and abolished unionized HCL.<sup>10</sup> It restructured B.C.'s apprenticeship system, repealing the NDP's 1994 and 1996 apprenticeship reforms and excluded unions from their previous role in governance.<sup>11</sup> It passed new labour legislation designed to undermine union organizing.<sup>12</sup> It eliminated trades' certification requirements for most construction work. This undermined the incentive to apprentice for a trade because there was little employment benefit in obtaining a provincial trades' qualification or a national Red Seal designation. It privileged non-union contractors in public infrastructure bidding. And it abandoned linking employment equity, apprenticeship and local employment with its procurement contracts, relying instead on low bid tendering.<sup>13</sup> These changes substantially weakened the apprenticeship system and reduced the qualified labour pool.<sup>14</sup>

Encouraged by non-union contractors, the 2001-17 Liberal government also deregulated much of B.C.'s construction industry, implementing the industry's wish to reduce public regulation of labour and qualification standards.<sup>15</sup> To cut red tape, it set a target of eliminating one-third of the existing industry regulations.<sup>16</sup> Efforts by Canada's federal government to encourage employers to support apprenticeships through subsidies, tax concessions and other enticements had little impact in addressing B.C.'s low apprenticeship completion rate.<sup>17</sup>

In its 2019 review of B.C.'s training performance over the previous years, the Canadian Apprenticeship Forum (CAF) noted that: "Apprenticeship program registrations and completions in British Columbia have failed to keep up with the rapid pace of growth in the province over the past five years..." It added that "... this gap contributes to the emergence of chronic labour market challenges for many skilled trades in the province."<sup>18</sup> The government also failed to improve the under-representation of women and Indigenous workers.<sup>19</sup>

# Priorities for a new government

The new government recognized that significant policy changes were needed to address the industry's chronic skills shortages and implement its employment equity and Indigenous reconciliation goals. After years of hostile government policy, the construction unions wanted a future government to amend public procurement practice to facilitate unionization and strengthen the apprenticeship system. In 2014, they persuaded MLA John Horgan to commit to establishing a new public corporation, based on the HCL model, in his successful campaign to lead the NDP. Anticipating the 2017 election, the unions formed the Community Benefits Coalition of B.C. to generate public support for their proposed new unionized Crown corporation. It was designed to implement a progressive program of local hire, training and employment equity.<sup>20</sup>

In its 2017 election platform, the NDP advocated a major infrastructure program to stimulate B.C.'s economy. Part of this entailed addressing the industry's serious skills shortage. Horgan had worked in the 1990s' NDP government, was familiar with HCL, and represented the Vancouver Island constituency of Langford-Juan de Fuca after his election as MLA in 2005. He knew that many island residents saw HCL as a major accomplishment of the earlier NDP government. He felt creating a similar initiative was a desirable public policy. While caution is always needed when attributing a major policy to one individual, arguably, without Horgan's role, as premier, in persuading his cabinet to support BCIB, it

is unlikely it would have been created, given the attacks his colleagues knew the government would face for such a pro-union initiative.<sup>21</sup>

The government believed it had a major role to play in addressing the industry's skills shortages. In this, its perspective differed from that of individual contractors. Its goal was to meet the training requirements of the entire industry. In contrast, the perspective of individual contractors is to provide for their immediate—and anticipated—labour needs. For them, supporting training only makes sense if they can see a benefit to their firm from investment in workers' skills development. Given the project-based nature of construction, in which future contracts—and, consequently, obligations to apprentices—cannot be guaranteed, contractors' willingness to support training is contingent on having a sound business case for their firms. They also must consider that the workers they train may choose to move to other employers on completion of their apprenticeships. Other employers, who fail to support apprenticeships, may actively poach their recent graduates further undermining support for apprenticeships. What distinguishes BCIB from other contractors is that its approach is shaped by the government's broader perspective to train for the entire industry.

# Negotiating the Community Benefits Agreement (CBA)

**O**n July 16, 2018, the government unveiled a new Crown Corporation, BCIB, to train and employ the trades' workforce on selected public infrastructure projects worth more than \$500 million. It negotiated a CBA with a council representing 19 building trades unions, which it then transferred to BCIB, making it the employer named in the agreement.<sup>22</sup> The CBA prioritized local employment, training and apprenticeship, while committing to diversifying the construction workforce. BCIB's anticipated role in promoting employment equity was key in persuading members of Horgan's cabinet to support the initiative.

The government's policy direction for BCIB was clarified in its initial press releases and in a series of mandate letters from successive ministers of finance.<sup>23 24</sup> For example, the July 16, 2018 press release outlined the focus of the initiative:

"A new, landmark agreement for key public-sector infrastructure projects in B.C. will deliver good-paying jobs, better training and apprenticeships, and more trades opportunities for Indigenous peoples, women and youth around the province. With this agreement, we're not just investing in roads, bridges and other infrastructure, we're investing in good jobs and new opportunities for people who live in B.C.... And with our focus on expanding apprenticeships

for young British Columbians, we're helping build B.C.'s next generation of construction workers."<sup>25</sup>

The press release also underscored the commitment of the building trades unions to support the government's training agenda and their desire to maximize apprenticeship completions as a key goal of the CBA. Finance Minister Carol James outlined the government's expectations for BCIB in her January 2020 ministerial letter to its board:

"Mobilize and grow a diverse, safe and skilled workforce through outreach to local communities, indigenous communities and under-represented groups. Ensure the development and tracking of apprenticeship participation and completion rates by working with the Industry Training Authority to enable a supported workforce pathway."<sup>26</sup>

This focus is reflected in BCIB's *Annual Service Plan* reports. Its 2020-21 report noted its commitment to "...employing traditionally underrepresented workers to diversify and grow the number of people entering and completing their certification in the skilled trades through targeted equity recruitment..."<sup>27</sup>

Finance Minister James' 2020 letter also specifically directed BCIB to promote reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples by adopting policies aligned with B.C.'s *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act* and the recommendations of *Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. Providing apprenticeships and other training opportunities is an integral part of this directive.

Both the government and the unions recognized that a toxic construction culture contributes to the high industry attrition rate, with too many apprentices failing to complete their training and too many qualified journey workers leaving construction. Racism, sexism and anti-gay attitudes exist on many worksites.<sup>28</sup> The CBA acknowledged the need to address this issue. Its workforce orientation program was designed to improve the culture on building sites. The relevant provision reads as follows:

"9.204 (a) The Employer will, in consultation with the Council, prepare and present an orientation to all Employees hired to work on the Site. (b) The orientation shall include safety, housekeeping, environmental stewardship and key provisions of this Agreement (e.g. jurisdiction, preferential hiring and community benefits, no strike/no lockout, role of the Council and Employer) and cultural awareness.

“9.205 The Employer, Contractors, Council and Affiliated Unions agree, in collaboration with local Indigenous communities, to provide sustainable, comprehensive Indigenous cultural competency training to all persons working on the Project.”

The CBA provides BCIB, as the employer, with the tools to implement its mandate. Key to this is BCIB’s ability to hire, train and dispatch workers to contractors. Recognizing that contractors need the workers they customarily use on their other work sites, it permits them to ‘name request’ specific workers. BCIB then hires them and assigns them to the requesting contractors. The number of ‘name requested’ workers is set out in the CBA and depends on the size of the contract. This ensures that contractors have access to the core workers they need. However, once contractors’ ‘name requests’ are fulfilled, BCIB can hire and dispatch other workers, according to the CBA’s detailed guidelines, including local residents, Indigenous workers, women, racialized workers, other equity workers and AIRCC union members.

Union support is particularly valuable for achieving BCIB’s training goals because B.C. unions operate extensive training programs through their Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee (JATC) schools, which they operate cooperatively with unionized employers. In addition, unions provide the qualified union journey workers needed to mentor apprentices on job sites, where 80 per cent of their learning takes place.<sup>29</sup>

Ministerial directives also address racism and systemic discrimination on BCIB work sites, including adopting the government’s Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) lens for its workforce programs. The government has instructed BCIB to reach out to Indigenous communities, inform them of opportunities for their members on its projects and assist their members with training and apprenticeship. BCIB has held literally hundreds of meetings with Indigenous communities. It has two full-time staff, recruited from Indigenous communities, to support Indigenous workers on its building sites.<sup>30</sup>

While contractors generally provide a brief orientation for new workers, BCIB is unique because its progressive orientation goals are embedded in the CBA, giving it a mandate to develop a significant program in cooperation with the unions. It has done this by implementing a two-day Respectful Onsite Initiative (ROI) for all workers.<sup>31</sup> One component of the ROI is History Matters. It provides Indigenous cultural competency training, including a discussion of the impact of settler colonialism on Indigenous Peoples and the ongoing legacy of past and current discrimination. It highlights the barriers Indigenous workers face

and emphasizes the importance of providing a supportive workplace environment for Indigenous workers—and all workers. Indigenous elders and knowledge sharers from local communities deliver the module. Another component of ROI is Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI). Its focus is to address racism, sexism and anti-LGBTQ+ behaviour—reasons why so many women and many men choose to leave construction.<sup>32</sup>

In light of the impact of climate change on society and the construction industry, BCIB also includes a climate literacy module in its ROI. Until 2022, Canada's Red Seal Standards, which establish the knowledge, skills and competencies apprentices require to pass their national exam, did not include a significant climate component. BCIB recognized this gap. Its climate literacy module discusses how the work of building workers impacts the environment and emphasizes their potential contribution to meeting Canada's climate goals.<sup>33</sup>

Some contractors now recognize the value of the ROI orientation program in improving the worksite culture and have asked BCIB to offer it on their non-BCIB work sites. Provincial agencies, Crown corporations and municipalities are also contracting with BCIB to offer ROI on their worksites.<sup>34</sup>

BCIB has encountered criticism for the cost of the two days of paid time allocated to its ROI. However, it maintains that this contributes significantly to making workplaces more welcoming, especially for Indigenous Peoples, women and other workers traditionally marginalized by the industry. Importantly, ROI orientation signals to new employees—and contractors—that, as the employer, BCIB expects them to support a welcoming workforce culture.

For unions, a collective agreement covering all BCIB's projects was a major win. It ensured that all workers received the same pay and benefits, regardless of the contractor to whom BCIB assigned them, a particularly important issue for Indigenous workers, women, racialized workers and others who are often paid less on construction projects.<sup>35</sup> The agreement prevents contractors from engaging in predatory labour practices, which are widespread in the industry, such as exploiting immigrants and temporary foreign workers in the underground economy, contracting with bogus 'independent operators' to circumvent employment obligations, or simply not paying workers. Standardizing wages prevents contractors with specific skills shortages from poaching workers from other contractors.<sup>36</sup> The CBA also requires all workers—and some contractors—to complete formal health and safety training. And it ensures that all BCIB workers have the protection of the collective agreement.

To address concerns of non-union contractors that AIRCC unions would use the fact that BCIB's workers were unionized on their worksites to apply to the Labour Relations Board to certify them, the agreement explicitly bars unions from doing this.<sup>37</sup> The government was concerned that non-union contractors might not bid on BCIB projects, fearing unionization. This concern might undermine the competitive bidding process and push up bid prices, exposing the initiative to criticisms that it would result in excessive procurement costs for taxpayers. The government was clear that any contractor would be free to bid on all BCIB projects, regardless of whether they have an existing union agreement. BCIB estimates that about 60 per cent are not organized on their other projects. Nor do workers need to be union members to seek work on BCIB sites, although they must join the appropriate union within 30 days. Thus far, there is no evidence that fewer contractors are bidding on BCIB projects, indicating that they are not being deterred by the fact that BCIB's workforce is unionized.

Because BCIB supplies workers to contractors, it has to ensure that they are properly trained and fully capable of meeting contractors' labour requirements. This objective is stated clearly in the government's annual ministerial directives to BCIB. The credibility of the initiative is dependent on BCIB dispatching workers who can deliver this commitment. BCIB vets the workers it dispatches, consulting with the relevant union on their qualifications, including whether they need further training. It also takes seriously any contractor complaints about their work performance, including re-assigning them, or requiring them to obtain further training, or other supports.



# Apprenticeship and workforce renewal

**A**s noted, a major problem facing Canada's construction industry is the reluctance of employers to support training.<sup>38</sup> Various factors affect the ability—and willingness—of employers to do this. One is how the industry itself is organized. According to the B.C. Construction Association, 92 per cent of employers had fewer than 20 employees in 2023.<sup>39</sup> Size is a critical factor in the capacity of employers to host apprenticeships because they need a sufficient number of qualified journey workers to mentor apprentices. Additionally, employing an apprentice involves a significant commitment, which is often challenging due to the short-term and uncertain nature of many contracts. While the government recognized it could not overcome every factor affecting apprenticeship success, it felt BCIB, as an employer, could contribute modestly to fixing the problem.

The government gave BCIB specific apprenticeship targets. BCIB requires contractors to sign BCIB-contractor, or BCIB-subcontractor agreements, committing them to work with BCIB in implementing its training goals, including ratios of apprentices to journey workers (BCIB Subcontractor Guide 2022). BCIB's approach to recruiting apprentices considers their need to progress through a structured workforce development program. Each BCIB project has specific targets, depending on the type of work and corresponding apprenticeship opportunities.

BCIB's employment data tracking system enables it to track and support their progress.

Attrition is another major industry problem. Too many apprentices, trainees and journey workers abandon construction. Almost 60 per cent of apprentices never finish. The reasons include precarious employment, low and insecure income, better opportunities in other economic sectors, lack of training support on job sites, the stresses of construction work, ever changing—and often remote—work locations, punishing work schedules and lack of child care. To this can be added the toll of physical injuries and mental health challenges.<sup>40</sup> In dispatching the same workers to several different contractors, BCIB can lessen the negative impact of layoffs. Its multiple projects have enabled it to place 21 per cent of its apprentices with other contractors<sup>41</sup> (Table 1, 2024).

The government also wanted to address the 'boom and bust' employment pattern that had proved so damaging to local communities affected by infrastructure projects. Building activity is disproportionately affected by the business cycle.<sup>42</sup> This is exacerbated by the provincial economy's exposure to fluctuating international commodity markets. During booms, high demand for labour encourages contractors to recruit outside local labour markets. However, the influx of workers adversely impacts local communities that face temporary increases in demand for housing and public services without corresponding increases in tax revenues.

Conversely, during busts, local employment falls, negatively impacting both workers and the local economy. Compounding this precarity is that outside contractors often bring in their own crews, ignoring the available qualified local labour force. The government wanted to smooth out these cyclical patterns and stabilize local employment. The CBA gives residents living within 100 km of worksites priority for employment, training and apprenticeships, encouraging local workers to stay in their communities and support local economies. BCIB's investments in local training are linked with providing work for those it trains.<sup>43</sup>

To deal with substance abuse, BCIB has developed an addiction and opioid awareness program to support its workers.<sup>44</sup> Due to its multi-project mandate, it achieves economies of scale by offering a similar support package to workers on all its job sites, something beyond the capacity of most contractors. Unions support BCIB's initiative through their highly regarded Construction Industry Rehabilitation Plan.<sup>45</sup> Established 35 years ago, its program addresses the specific needs of construction workers.

# The critical importance of BCIB's payroll-based employment data system

Policy researchers have complained for years about the lack of quality data on apprenticeship and employment equity in B.C. In his thesis on apprenticeship programs, Matte notes that "...the absence of consistent and reliable data on apprenticeships in BC restricts the ability of researchers...to provide more research-informed insights for policy development."<sup>46</sup> In contrast to the rest of B.C.'s construction sector, BCIB operates a sophisticated data system through its payroll system. It asks workers to self-identify equity group membership voluntarily. It integrates this information with its payroll data to track employment, residency, training, apprenticeship, classification, qualification, hours worked on various projects, contractor(s) to whom workers have been assigned, union membership, workplace grievances and safety incidents.<sup>47</sup>

This comprehensive data system gives BCIBs the capacity to implement the CBA's mandate. It has no counterpart elsewhere in Canada's construction industry and is, arguably, the most sophisticated

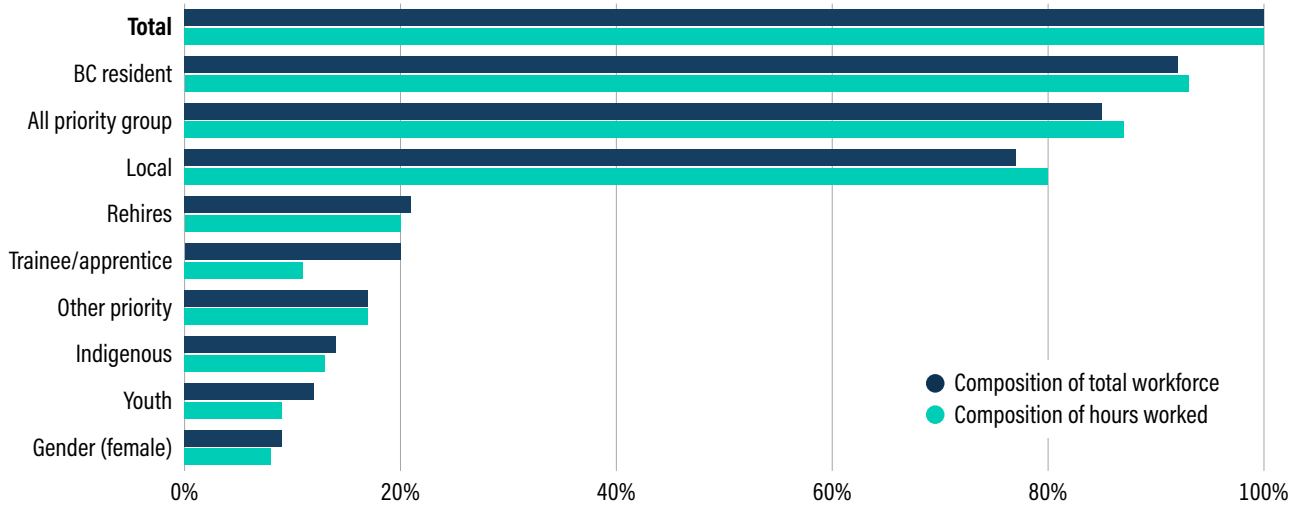
employment equity data system of any industry in Canada. Without a payroll-linked data system, BCIB would have to rely on periodic surveys, or union and employer estimates of how well targets were being achieved, an approach characteristic of many PLAs.<sup>48</sup> These surveys are very imprecise measurement tools, unsuited for documenting real-time performance, particularly because of the short-term nature of many construction contracts. In contrast, BCIB can provide high-quality, real-time data on how it is achieving its targets, making possible timely interventions. This data enables BCIB to provide verifiable information to government, Indigenous organizations, women-in-trades associations, contractors, unions and the media. Because BCIB is public and subject to audit, the data's accuracy can be independently confirmed.

The following four data tables document its performance in meeting its targets. The first shows the total number of employees on its payroll for all its projects from 2019 to 2024, the hours they worked and a breakdown by B.C. residency, priority target group, local resident status (within 100 km of job sites), number of workers rehired to other BCIB contracts or projects, Indigenous workers, trainees/apprentices, women and youth. The data shows that 92 percent of its workers have been from British Columbia and they received 93 percent of the total paid hours. BCIB's 14 per cent Indigenous employment rate is more than double the provincial average of six per cent, while its women's employment rate, at nine per cent, is one-and-a-half times the six per cent provincial construction average. BCIB's 20 per cent apprenticeship rate is considerably above the estimated industry average of 12 per cent. While a solid performance, it was lower than originally anticipated by the government because seven of BCIB's first 10 projects involved highway construction, which has few apprenticeable trades.

The level of detail shown in the preceding table is unique in the industry. It is notable how granular the data is. BCIB can provide the actual number of hours worked by each category of workers. The number of hires can be compared with the amount of work they receive to determine if equity hires are receiving their fair share of work.

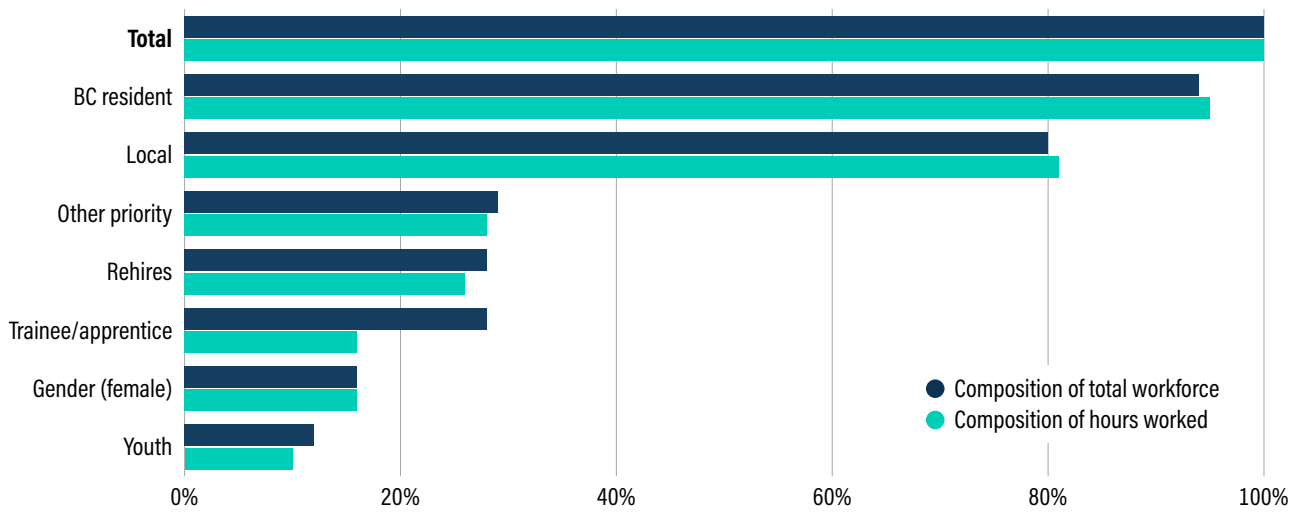
Increasing the proportion of Indigenous workers has been a key objective of BCIB. The following table provides the total number of Indigenous workers and the hours they have worked between 2019 and the end of 2024. It indicates B.C. origin, local residency and rehires. Notably, the 28 per cent rehire rate reflects BCIB's commitment to Indigenous employment. As there is often overlap between Indigenous workers and other equity categories, BCIB collects data on these metrics as well.<sup>49</sup>

**Figure 1 / Comparing the number of workers with hours worked by all employees**



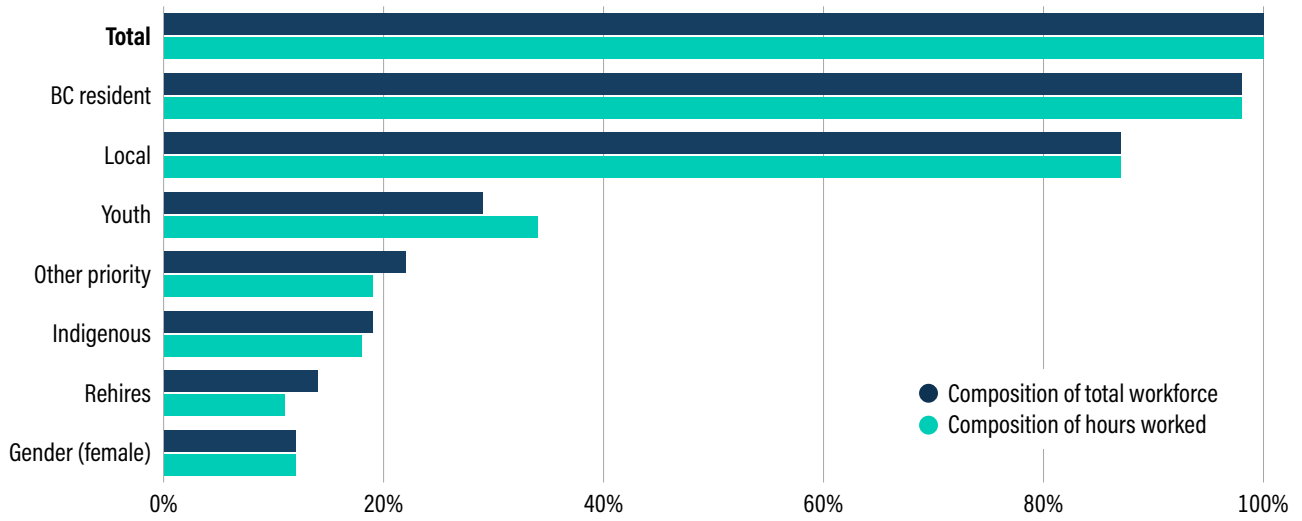
**Note** Other priority includes equity, 2SLGBTQ+, people with disabilities and visible minorities  
**Source** BCIB database from 7/8/2019 to 12/28/2024 for all projects (reproduced with permission)

**Figure 2 / Comparing the number of workers with hours worked by Indigenous employees**



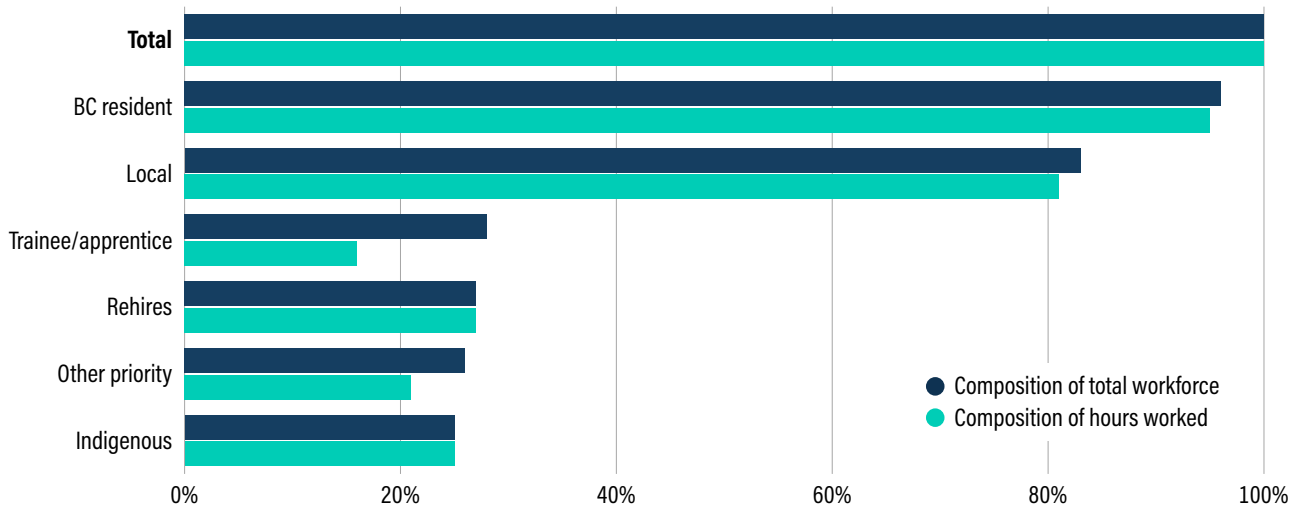
**Note** Other priority includes equity, 2SLGBTQ+, people with disabilities and visible minorities  
**Source** BCIB database from 7/8/2019 to 12/28/2024 for all projects (reproduced with permission)

**Figure 3 / Comparing the number of workers with hours worked by apprentices and trainees**



**Note** Other priority includes equity, 2SLGBTQ+, people with disabilities and visible minorities  
**Source** BCIB database from 7/8/2019 to 12/28/2024 for all projects (reproduced with permission)

**Figure 4 / Comparing the number of workers with hours worked by women**



**Note** Other priority includes equity, 2SLGBTQ+, people with disabilities and visible minorities  
**Source** BCIB database from 7/8/2019 to 12/28/2024 for all projects (reproduced with permission)

A key BCIB objective has been to address B.C.'s dismal record in training its construction workforce. Accordingly, BCIB tracks the number of trainees and apprentices. Since it was established, BCIB has supported 988 apprentices and trainees. The trainee/apprentice category includes both because not all occupations for which it provides training are apprenticeable. Although not shown on a separate table, the database also tracks individual trades and occupations.

The relatively small proportion of women in construction has been researched for many years.<sup>50</sup> Government and industry efforts to increase their on-site proportion have fallen short.<sup>51</sup> BCIB carefully tracks its progress in this area, including specific sub-categories, most notably participation of Indigenous women.

BCIB's database is also able to break down the numbers for each of its 10 projects. Consequently, it has detailed information on the proportion of workers and their share of hours worked for members of one of the priority groups, local employees, Indigenous workers, women, youth, trainees, rehires or members of other target group. Again, this level of detail contrasts with the very limited information that PLAs are able to provide because they lack a project-wide payroll-based data system and have to rely on estimates from dozens of contractors whose data cannot be easily verified.

# The impact of the BCIB initiative on unions

The CBA ensured that all workers on BCIB sites in the classifications it included would be—or become—union members. While about 60 per cent of contracts on BCIB projects go to contractors who do not otherwise have agreements with AIRCC unions, all the workers they supervise are unionized with BCIB. This results in more AIRCC union members on BCIB projects than if unions relied on the success of unionized contractors in winning public infrastructure bids. However, the CBA imposes challenges for unions internally. Some existing members question the CBA's hiring priority for contractors 'name requested' workers, and its local residency and equity focus. Members living elsewhere in B.C. or Canada may feel union membership should give them a higher priority. Additionally, BCIB does not follow traditional union recruitment pathways—pathways that involve informal family, community and workplace connections.

While some employees that BCIB recruits will be AIRCC members, many will have joined as a condition of employment and some because they have been 'name requested' by contractors. These workers may not believe in unions or they may never have worked on a unionized construction site. This challenges unions to establish positive relationships with them, demonstrating the value of union membership and the advantages of working under a collective agreement. This can



mean extra servicing work. Unions' response to this challenge affects how well new members integrate into their existing memberships.

A major union benefit for BCIB workers is that they get paid in full, including benefits and pensions. Non-payment of wages is common in construction.<sup>52</sup> Contractors can go bankrupt, leaving no money to pay the outstanding payroll. In the most extreme case, some might just refuse to pay workers at the end of a project, forcing workers or unions to pursue lost wages through the courts. Payment insecurity undermines workers' long-term commitment to remaining in the industry.

# Opposition to BCIB and the CBA

From its announcement, the CBA was controversial. Non-union contractors and major B.C. business interests challenged the establishment of BCIB and its CBA. Intervenors included B.C.'s Independent Contractors and Business Association (ICBA), the Progressive Contractors Association (PCA), the B.C. Chamber of Commerce, the B.C. Construction Federation, the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, the Vancouver Regional Construction Association and various individual companies.<sup>53</sup> In short, virtually all of B.C.'s business sector, excluding unionized construction contractors, opposed the initiative.<sup>54</sup>

Failing to derail the CBA at the Labour Relations Board, they challenged it in the B.C. courts, arguing that it violated workers' charter rights.<sup>55</sup> The Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), a competitor union federation not affiliated to the 19 AIRCC unions, also challenged the CBA.<sup>56</sup> It asserted that it was unfair for its members to be forced to pay dues to AIRCC unions when they were already members of CLAC. It saw the CBA as a sweetheart deal between the NDP and its favored union supporters.<sup>57</sup> Despite these legal challenges, the government, BCIB and AIRCC succeeded in defending the agreement.

An example of the campaign against BCIB and the CBA is found in the polling carried out by one of its opponents. In 2018, PCA commissioned Mainstreet Research to obtain the views of B.C. residents about unionized PLAs that share many of the characteristics of the unionized CBA.<sup>58</sup> The poll asserted that PLAs could raise the costs of public construction by

20 per cent to 30 per cent and asked participants if they thought this was acceptable. No evidence was provided for the cost estimate. The poll indicated that "...British Columbians Oppose Restrictive Labour Agreements that Inflate Cost of Public Infrastructure Projects." It also asserted that "...77 per cent of decided respondents oppose restrictive labour agreements."<sup>59</sup> Not surprisingly, the unions challenged the poll as fundamentally biased, while the government challenged the cost estimates of opponents of BCIB and its CBA.<sup>60</sup>

Critics' arguments that a union membership requirement denies choice to workers ignores much of B.C.'s current labour relations practice. Such agreements are normal throughout B.C.'s public sector, including at other Crown corporations, such as B.C. Hydro and the Insurance Corporation of B.C. as well as teachers, nurses, health professionals, care aides, government employees and municipal workers.

One reason for the hostility to BCIB by business is that it signalled that the government was attempting to halt—and perhaps reverse—the long-term decline of unionized construction in the province. Union density had plummeted from being among the highest of Canadian provinces in the 1970s to among the lowest.<sup>61</sup> Another objection was that it eliminates the role of contractors as employers.<sup>62</sup> Loss of the ability to hire and fire, while having to supervise the workforce within the terms of a collective agreement—and in cooperation with BCIB and the unions—represents a profound change to the traditional relationship between worker and employer. Despite the attacks on BCIB, the government has continued to maintain support for the initiative.

BCIB has faced its most challenging issue from an Indigenous contractor, Jon Coleman. He protested the requirement that he use BCIB's employees in his small trucking and waste removal company on the Cowichan Hospital project. He argued that, as an Indigenous employer, he should be able to hire his own workers and that the CBA's union requirements were a violation of the government's commitment to reconciliation. He wanted BCIB abolished. He appealed to the media and the opposition parties in the legislature to support his demands. They saw this as a way to portray the government as duplicitous in its dealings with First Nations.<sup>63</sup>

The government defended BCIB's performance on Indigenous issues, noting its documented success in hiring and training Indigenous workers, its efforts to change the culture on construction sites and its support from many Indigenous communities. While Coleman's interests as an employer did not necessarily reflect the interests of BCIB's Indigenous workers, the adverse publicity has made the government more cautious in expanding

the number of future projects being awarded to BCIB and forced it to somewhat scale down its ambitious growth plans. Partly in response to the controversy, it established the Transportation and Investment Corporation (TI Corp.), overseen by the Ministry of Transportation and Transit, which uses a parallel procurement process using more traditional competitive tendering, including PLAs. This has resulted in a decision to pass over BCIB in the award of several major projects, such as the Massey Tunnel and the Steveston Interchange.<sup>64</sup>

However, the ability of the TI Corp. to achieve the government's local employment, training and equity targets is problematic. Despite providing generous equity subsidies to its contractors on major non-BCIB infrastructure projects, it has proved very difficult to determine the extent to which it has met government goals. Without a payroll-based data system comparable to BCIBs, effective auditing has proved extremely difficult, raising concerns about whether providing money to contractors to encourage diversifying their workforces is a viable way to achieve public policy objectives.

# The debate over the cost of BCIB

**B**.C. business interests argue that BCIB dramatically increases infrastructure costs. Chamber of Commerce spokesperson Jock Finlayson claimed this would add “hundreds of millions of dollars” to procurement costs.<sup>65</sup> Opposition parties have echoed these claims frequently in the B.C. legislature, as documented extensively in Hansard. In justifying the initiative, the government did not claim that it would cost the same as conventional low bid procurement. Instead, it estimated that the approach would add between four per cent and seven per cent to overall procurement costs, amounting to between \$52 million and \$91 million, based on an average of \$2 billion annually in project costs.<sup>66</sup> Costs would vary, as a percentage, on different projects due to size, location, type of construction, local labour supply, training requirements and the mix of workforce skills needed. It justified the extra costs as a sound investment in long-term workforce development. Recent Ministry of Finance data indicates that the additional costs are considerably less than originally estimated, in the range of one per cent to four per cent—most in the lower end—depending on the project.<sup>67</sup>

BCIB’s administrative costs have stabilized at about \$15 million annually, supporting about 80 employees.<sup>68</sup> Much of this expenditure is to provide essential administrative services to contractors—services that they would otherwise provide themselves. These include managing payrolls, recruiting and training workers, handling HR, operating IT services and paying statutory employer deductions such as EI, CPP and income tax.<sup>69</sup> Opponents have also claimed that unionization

would reduce bid competition from non-union companies, driving up procurement costs.<sup>70</sup> However, the government has found no shortage of bids on BCIB projects compared with other infrastructure projects.

There is considerable evidence from national and international studies that PLAs and CBAs are not significantly more costly than traditional infrastructure procurement largely because of the higher productivity of well trained workers.<sup>71</sup> An important BC study by Duncan, Philips and Prus comparing the costs of BC's earlier prevailing wage legislation on school construction found no significant differences between periods in which the legislation was, or was not, in place.<sup>72</sup> Governments increasingly include social, employment and training requirements in their contract tenders to leverage additional benefits from construction purchases. Like BCIB, they believe the resulting benefits are greater than any potential marginal cost increases.<sup>73</sup>

Underlying business claims that the CBA raises costs is the assumption that unionized workers are overpaid and that much of the training associated with the apprenticeship system is not needed. This ignores the increased productivity of a skilled workforce. While critics are circumspect about arguing that workers should get less, low wages are how many contractors keep bid costs down. Bidders also cut costs by choosing not to invest in training and apprenticeships, placing the burden on individual workers and government. These practices benefit individual contractors. But the "savings" undermine the development of a skilled workforce. Low-bid working conditions also make construction less attractive as a career option, leading to higher attrition and a waste of the personal investment apprentices and journey workers leave behind when they exit the industry.<sup>74</sup>

# Managing relations with contractors

**W**hile business interests have been highly critical of BCIB's role as the workforce employer and the CBA for its union requirements, in reality the initiative provides a wide range of services that benefit contractors. These include supplying the qualified workers contractors need, promoting a stable workforce, encouraging a supportive onsite culture and ensuring good health and safety practices. Finding qualified workers is a challenge for many contractors in BC's tight labour market. In locating and assigning qualified workers to contractors' job sites, BCIB provides a valuable service, particularly for smaller ones with limited capacity to search B.C.'s labour market.

As part of its mandate to promote a more efficient provincial construction industry, BCIB provides prospective bidders on infrastructure projects with timely and project-relevant labour market information. This is intended to give them a better sense of the availability of the various trades with the skills they will need. It now has an extensive registry of local and B.C. trades' workers, as well as individuals applying for its training programs. These are services for the broader industry which are not performed under other contract tendering arrangements. In managing the payroll and taking responsibility for many of the human resource and administrative functions that contractors normally perform, BCIB frees contractors to focus on organizing the work on their projects. This is particularly valuable for smaller contractors for whom handling these matters can be a significant burden.

BCIB recognizes that while contractors do not employ the workforce, they organize and manage the work and assign tasks to BCIB's employees. Their cooperation is essential to achieving its apprenticeship and workforce development goals as well as ensuring that projects operate efficiently. Contractors' supervisory practices can contribute significantly to achieving a welcoming workplace culture and supporting the government's equity initiatives. Building positive relations with contractors on its worksites is, therefore, a central part of BCIB's job. To this end, its staff meet with potential new contractors as part of the pre-bid process and, again, with successful bidders before they start their jobs. It provides a detailed *Subcontractor Guide* to answer contractors' questions about BCIB's functions and the role of unions on building sites.<sup>75</sup>

As noted, contractors remain responsible for workforce supervision. This includes recommending discipline, suspension and termination where they are dissatisfied with worker performance. But they must notify BCIB when they wish to impose disciplinary measures. They can ask BCIB to re-assign, retrain or dismiss workers. Under the terms of the CBA, BCIB must investigate and determine how best to respond, bearing in mind the need to meet reasonable production standards, respect workers' rights and consult with the relevant union.

From the government's perspective, the ongoing turnover of contractors and workers—a characteristic of the project nature of construction—exposes them to the CBA and BCIB's ROI orientation program. Consequently, it hopes to change attitudes and behaviours on job sites, facilitating workplace culture changes that accommodates its goal of a more diverse workforce. As both contractors and workers will work on other projects outside the CBA in the future, BCIB may have a wider, although modest, influence on the overall culture of B.C.'s construction industry.



# Impacts on workers

**B**CIB's explicit goal of improving workplace culture differentiates it from the narrower, production-oriented mainstream industry. It also contrasts with previous government approaches to address skills shortages, which have provided generous incentives to employers to support apprenticeships, while ignoring the need to change workers' lived experience on building sites.<sup>76</sup> BCIB is using its role as an employer to address differently the poor outcomes of these expensive but largely ineffective initiatives. BCIB's support for training and apprenticeship, its efforts to retain skilled workers in the industry by promoting employment continuity and its focus on hiring locally so people can find jobs in their own community, represents a long-term investment in the industry's workforce. These initiatives are backed up by on-site changes that facilitate worker retention, enabling BCIB to tackle challenges that other approaches have failed to solve.<sup>77</sup>

Easy to overlook in assessing BCIB is its effort to improve the lives of the workers themselves.<sup>78</sup> Its focus on creating welcoming, inclusive and respectful workplaces is a valuable initiative in its own right. It addresses a major problem in B.C.'s construction industry: the toxic work culture that is characteristic of too many job sites. Making the working lives of people better on the job is also a perfectly legitimate and desirable objective of public policy.<sup>79</sup> Workers benefit from having access to training or opportunities to acquire the knowledge, skills and competencies of a qualified journey worker, both from the personal satisfaction associated

with the learning process and from the subsequent ability to exercise agency on worksites, an important component of job satisfaction.

# Conclusion

## Can BCIB be a model for Canada's construction industry?

The establishment of BCIB and the CBA it negotiated with the building unions is a unique experiment in restructuring construction employment relations. It has been dependent on the willingness of the government to implement the necessary legislation, coupled with the support of the building trades unions. Although focused on BCIB's specific projects, it has the potential to influence the broader industry by example and through the flow of contractors and workers passing through its employment system. Through its unique and comprehensive data system, it can monitor progress on key training and employment metrics in real time, facilitating timely interventions which BCIB has actively pursued. Most importantly, it offers a pathway for improving the on-site experience of construction workers, making the industry more attractive as a long-term career while facilitating the recruitment and retention of a more diverse workforce. BCIB and its CBA are not solutions for all the industry's complex problems. But the initiative demonstrates a creative and effective way to tackle some of its most pressing challenges.

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