



# A Conversation With CLRAO Executive Director Tony Fanelli



## The Construction and Labour Relations Association of Ontario

By: C. Ross Harrison

If you work in construction in Canada, there is a good chance you have heard of CLRAO, The Construction and Labour Relations Association of Ontario. The nonprofit employer organization is the bargaining association for six trades: carpenters, labourers, operating engineers, bricklayers, cement masons, operative plasters, and road workers.

Tony Fanelli, the Executive Director of CLRAO, enumerates some of the organization’s primary functions for us. “CLRAO has a responsibility as an employer association to administer and negotiate collective agreements across the province in the industrial, commercial, and institutional sector of the construction industry.” He further explains: “It also acts as a secretary to those employer bargaining agencies.” Beside these responsibilities, Tony informs us that CLRAO operates “on behalf of employers in dealing with all sorts of labour matters.” This includes dealing with both unions and government by providing advice from an industry perspective. Elaborating on his own role within the organization, Tony explains that “the Executive Director essentially facilitates all the meetings that need to be set up within the various bargaining agencies. Then we organize and have the responsibility to negotiate these collective agreements every three years when they expire. Then, we administer those agreements again across the province and all the local organizations within CLRAO.”



## Tony Fanelli: A Life in The Industry:

In addition to helping the CLRAO, Tony Fanelli has experience in a wide variety of fields, including construction business, and labour. He has served as a management trustee on the Teamsters' National Pension Fund since 1985 and the United Associations' National Training Trust Fund since 1996. He has also chaired both the Industrial Contractors' Association of Canada and the Boilermaker Contractors' Association. A graduate of the University of Western Ontario, who also holds degrees from both the University of Windsor and York University, Tony's has an extensive background in numerous energy sectors, such as nuclear, fossil fuel, solar, wind, and hydroelectric, just to name a few. In short, he is a man who has worn a great many hats over the course of his life.

Growing up in Sarnia, Ontario, Fanelli had the opportunity to get involved in the trades at an early age. At that time, Sarnia was seeing a boom in construction projects that were building chemical plants and refineries. This provided young Tony Fanelli ample employment opportunities; however, as is often the case, there was also a strong family element behind his choice of work. "My father had quite an influence on my career path. He was a business manager in Sarnia at the time and had been there for some 30 years and so he had a lot of influence on getting people into the trades. I think that had a lot of influence on how I see the industry and, obviously, it allowed me the opportunity to work with the trade unions as well as providing me the income I needed to finance my education."



After completing his education at the University of Western Ontario in 1978 Tony returned to Sarnia, initially working in the automotive industry for Ford. "I was in supervision there and moved into the Labour Relations' department later. This helped me understand how workplaces operate, so it was a good starting point for me."

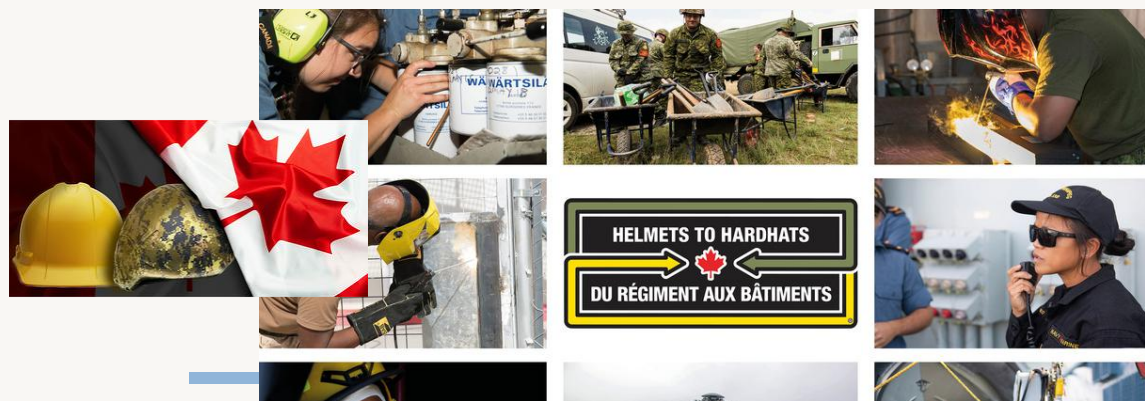
After his time at Ford, Tony would eventually move onto construction; however, his stint in the automotive business provided him insight into the construction industry. Speaking of the two industries, Tony states, "they are very different. Construction is a very dynamic industry, in the sense that you're working from project to project and our workforces have to move with those projects; whereas, in the automotive industry, you're set in one location, building cars. In construction, you're up against the elements; you have different responsibilities."

Despite these differences, Tony notes that there still exists some overlap between the two. "In many ways, what happens in automotive plants, or any other (industrial) facilities when they are looking for skilled trades, is that they generally pick away at the construction industry because we are by far the best trained. We put a lot of time and effort into the training, and when employers are looking for the best kind of skills, construction tends to provide them. Especially, right now, there is a huge premium on skilled trades. The demographics of our society are moving where people are retiring and moving on. Therefore, whether it's in automotive or other industries, they're searching for skilled people and construction labourers can easily be moved into an industrial-type environment because they have the basics for what they need inside a plant."

## CLRAO and Helmets to Hardhats: Working with Veterans

Given his prominent role in construction and his numerous connections in the industry, it is unsurprising that Tony Fanelli has been working with the charitable organization, Helmets to Hardhats (H2H). Run by Joe Maloney, H2H helps Veterans transition back to civilian life by finding work in the construction industry. Tony tells us he has known Joe Maloney even before he decided to work with Helmets to Hardhats. "I met Joe back in Sarnia in the early days of my career. He became the business manager of a local 128 for the Boilermakers and then; after that, he became the international rep. Through the course of my career, I've worked with Joe pretty closely in the work that I was doing as well as the trade union work that Joe was doing. Then, when he took on the role at Helmets to Hardhats, I started working with him on that side of it as well. I've known him for a long time."

Like so many industry professionals who have worked with H2H, Tony believes Veterans bring unique skills to the construction industry. "They bring teamwork, they have great endurance, and a great work ethic. I have to say that, in a number of cases, where Veterans have been hired, they move right into supervision because they have the discipline, and they have all of the things that construction companies need in managing workforces. That teamwork, and the motivation that they bring to their leadership, has been exemplary in our industry."



Tony explains how CLRAO has worked closely with the Carpenters' District Council of Ontario to establish a pilot program to bring Veterans into the trade. "The Carpenters actually appointed Mike Humphries, a Veteran who was a member of their union, to be their representative to H2H. Mike makes connections with the organizations to bring people into the trade and get them trained up and prepared to come into the construction industry. So, I can't say enough about what the Carpentry Union has done in terms of promoting this whole idea about bringing in Veterans."

While Helmets to Hardhats is a charity meant to help Veterans, the extent to which these Veterans in turn benefit the construction industry cannot be overstated. According to a recent report by Buildforce Canada, Ontario alone will have to recruit as many as 100,000 new construction workers over the next decade to keep up with demand caused by new building projects and the ageing out of older workers. Tony Fanelli argues that the military-to-construction pipeline that H2H provides could indeed be instrumental in addressing the coming demand for more workers in the trades. "We just do not have enough tradespeople in the industry based on the demands that we have right now. [Veterans] could play a significant role in providing the skills and discipline the industry needs; they are trainable, and they have the basic skills and all the right qualities that employers are looking for. I think in the next three to five years in this province, we're going to have real challenges meeting the demand."

## Meeting the Challenges of a Growing Industry

Fanelli hopes that the government will not choke investments into the construction industry by raising interest rates since doing so would discourage investments into new construction projects; however, he is generally confident this will not be the case and that new building projects will continue to proliferate in the province over the coming decade. One of the main factors fueling his confidence in this position is the coming growth of the nuclear energy industry. Having worked in multiple energy sectors, including nuclear, Fanelli is particularly aware of this coming transformation and what it means for the construction industry at large. "Our transportation systems in North America are turning electric and, as they do, we don't have the infrastructure to be able to supply the electricity to meet the demand that would happen if transportation were to all go electric. Over time, you're going to see more and more power production – be it nuclear, be it hydroelectric, or be it other environmentally-sound suppliers or producers of electricity."

This transformation will obviously require an increase in work for the construction industry as it will necessitate the building of new infrastructure on a massive scale.



Of course, bringing more people into the workforce is only part of the challenge in meeting the demands of a growing construction sector; training the new recruits is yet another hurdle that needs to be overcome. To this end, Tony explains how training programs have been established to assure workers build the skills they need as quickly as possible.

"We're working on putting programs together now that we've got some funding from the federal government to assist us getting these workers into the industry and trained, so that they meet the health and safety requirements. Once they're in, whatever upgrade training is required, we add it through an apprenticeship system. In the unionized sector, we are very organized in bringing in people into the apprenticeship system. We then assess their skills to see where they are in the trade, and then move them through the process. Once they're in the system, they have huge opportunities ahead of them."



## Meeting the Challenges of a Growing Industry (cont'd)

Besides increasing the size of the workforce and providing them with the training they need, another consideration is finding workers who can be mobile when necessary. As Fanelli explains, with projects going on all over the province, construction workers often have to travel vast distances, sometimes requiring them to be away from home for long periods of time. “The big challenge I think we have with the younger generation is moving with the work. In other words, construction isn't stationary. You've got work that goes on all across the province, so if there's no work in Ottawa, you might have to go to Toronto, or you might have to go to Kingston, or wherever the work is. The biggest challenge I find, at least with the younger generation, is making them mobile, making them understand that you have to go where the work is. It's not a hard challenge, but it's a challenge where we have to meet those demands. Once we interview these folks as they come into the system, we make it very clear to them that their job may not be in their backyard.”

Despite the difficulties such travel demands can sometimes create, Tony points out that the general scale of pay makes it well worth it. Remote jobs often pay more and the 2020s will almost certainly see the growth of infrastructure projects and mining operations in Northern Ontario that will need to be carried out by dedicated construction workers, who are willing to travel the distance.

### The Rewards of a Job Well Done

While Tony admits that meeting the demand for workers and providing them training are the biggest challenges the industry is facing, he nonetheless thinks that Ontario's provincial government has been working diligently to overcome this issue through outreach to students, who will become the next generation of tradespersons. “I think the provincial government is doing an excellent job right now. They've got a number of programs that they're funding to get the message out to elementary and high schools. I can't commend them enough for the amount of effort that they put into getting the word out, and it's starting to have an impact. Because, let's face it, when a young man or a young lady wants to get into the trades, they are still making up their minds about what they want to do in life. But there are programs now in this province, which would open that door and let them be part of the various trades. So, I think this is only going to grow and it's only getting get better as that message starts to unfold across the province.”



## The Rewards of a Job Well Done (cont'd)

Tony believes that these programs will attract people who have the passion for problem solving that is so integral to the construction industry. "It can be a very rewarding career; we're looking for people who love to work with their hands, who have the ability to think their way through things and be problem solvers. When you get into the field and you start building something, you might realize 'this doesn't fit quite right.' So, now you've got to fix it! So, there's always problem solving going on and the job is not the same day to day. This keeps you interested in what you're doing as a tradesperson." Fanelli asserts that rising to these challenges, overcoming them, and thereby gaining the self-satisfaction that comes from completing great and enduring projects, is what makes the job worthwhile. "It gives you a sense of accomplishment when you look at a project that you've been a part of, whether it's a highway or a building or a refinery, or a project of any kind; you can look at it and be proud of what you've done."



For his own part, Tony says what he is personally proudest of is the satisfaction that comes from imparting the knowledge he has learned in his over three decades' long career to the contractors he serves. "Part of what my dad taught me very early in my career is that you have a workforce, and you have the employers but, if they don't work together, nothing gets done. So, part of my role is to take all that experience that I've gained over the years and use it to the benefit of the people on both sides: not just employers, but laborers as well, because we need to have things working very cohesively together. I've been blessed in the career path that I've taken. It started out with the trades, and I've had the opportunity to literally work across Canada and the U.S and beyond. Before coming to CLRAO, I had the opportunity to work around the world and to see how work gets done in various other jurisdictions. This added to the knowledge and the experience of the work that I do. Now I'm imparting some of that knowledge and that experience to the contractors that I currently represent. So, I've been blessed. I've had a great run in my career and hopefully I'm now helping the people I represent with my experiences and working to make the system better."

**For more information on the CLRAO,  
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