Toronto's construction scene includes superb innovation as the architecturally controversial Eaton's Shopping Center—where the support and service structure of the building is exposed—serves as a good backdrop for ISCO President Stan Sosin.

For a man who professes to a fervent belief in “first things first” even he had to admit that the cart was irrevocably before the horse. The only difference the situation had from other similar positioning problems was this: Canada’s Stanley A. Sosin was somehow making it work beautifully. It worked in reverse maybe, but it was working.

Here the 33-year-old Toronto contractor was with a new wall and ceiling company, no trucks, no equipment, no bank credit, no supplier support, no backlog—and $1 million in work already on the books.

From Stan’s ever-present optimistic viewpoint, the good news about the situation was that he proved the new company could get a high volume of work im-

Issues Without the Emotionalism

Toronto’s Stan Sosin has the contractor viewpoint but keeps a calm attitude about major controversies
mediately. The bad news was, of course, that none of it would start up for another six months, a time period when Stan and his equally sharing partners, brother Frank, and former co-worker, Gino Consoli, would be required to earn some semblance of a living.

All three men had quit their jobs with the Acme Lathing Company’s Toronto division after negotiations to buy for themselves a one-third interest in the company failed. That was in January, 1973.

Today, only a few years later the three men are chief executive officers of ALC, Inc., of Toronto, a $5 million-a-year diversified company in wall and ceiling construction—and Stan is on a leave of absence from the company to do industry work as President of the Interior Systems Contractors of Ontario.

In the two years that Stan has functioned as the chief association officer of the Ontario contractors’ group it has grown from 45 to 75 members, become involved in negotiations with the Lathers, Painters, and Plasterers with some labor relations involvement with the Bricklayers and Laborers, affiliated with iaWCC/GDCI, and expanded the awareness quotient among Canadian and United States groups of the Ontario contractors.

To Stan Sosin, this is merely touching the front limits of potential for his group and he shows no sign of giving up the task he has set for himself. He still shares financially in the wall and ceiling company he helped put together in 1973, but his fast-speaking, pulmonary paced talents are devoted now to his industry.

For the contractors he represents, Stan is the complete staff man. An architect by training, a contractor by profession, an association executive by choice, he can move from design professional’s office, to union business agent, to government agency with ease, speed, and confidence.

A native of Doncaster, England, he moved to Canada’s Saskatchewan province as an infant with his parents, Ted and Irene Hart Sosin. Twenty years ago, his father, now a retired government civil servant living in Toronto, moved the family to Toronto.

There Stan finished high school, where he played center on the football team, and then graduated as an architect from the University of Toronto where he also played soccer.

Married to the former Barbara Osterhammer, a native of Berlin, Stan who is the father of a son, Trevor, 11, and a daughter, Stephanie, 7, worked for about six months before going to Halifax on a holiday with his father-in-law, Peter Osterhammer. It was Stan’s father-in-law, a partner with Acme Lathing Company’s Maritime division who recruited Stan into the construction business.

Later, he transferred to Acme’s Toronto operation where Gino Consoli was a foreman. By the time the two were ready to leave and begin their own company Stan was a General Manager; Gino was Superintendent, and Frank Sosin, whom Stan had recruited, was a company estimator.

A member of the Toronto Board of Trade and the Canadian Club, Stan plays tennis and squash, jogs and enjoys such other outside activities as trap shooting, moose and deer hunting, and fishing.

As he is seldom in any one place for long, CONSTRUCTION DIMENSIONS intercepted the swift moving Sosin in Toronto, moving about the city at a hectic pace while talking about the construction industry both in Canada and the United States and anywhere else where people like to build things.

DIMENSIONS: Stan, you moved fulltime into association type work yet still managed to increase contractor membership in ISCO during the past two years when there was a world-wide recession going on. How did you manage to fight the trend?

SOSIN: We’re only beginning to feel the sting here in Canada now. The recession seems to be hitting us later than it did in the United States, and at the present time I’d estimate that Canadian construction is down about 50%.

DIMENSIONS: Why the lag?

SOSIN: I wish I knew. Historically, both of our countries have been pretty much up and down the economic scale together but this one hit the States hard and missed us. Now, you’re on the way back up and Canada is down and it appears that we’re headed for even lower levels. Alberta seems to be the only province that has avoided a decline, probably because of the oil and coal there.

DIMENSIONS: You might talk about being on the way back up but the AFL-CIO Building Trades Department is still unhappy about what they term as excessive unemployment rates—somewhere be-

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SOSIN: 
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between 12% and 17%—among union craftsmen?

SOSIN: There’s some 30% unemployment in unionized construction right now, and it’s having a disastrous effect. Then, too, the shortages for insulating materials are sufficiently severe that it could take the edge off what construction remains.

DIMENSIONS: With conditions like that, the bankruptcy rate will start climbing. What are you doing now to prevent any further deterioration?

SOSIN: As far as bankruptcies are concerned, they’ve already jumped, especially in the smaller shops. Furthermore, some 10% of Toronto contractors are inactive because of shortages, reduced business and the like.

To blunt the downturn, we’re now attacking in two directions: first, we have gone to all levels of the Canadian government and asked them to loosen up on construction spending, and second, we have asked the government to remove great amounts of restrictive legislation and regulatory obstacles to business.

The government has responded very well to the spending appeal through tax concessions and legislation. On getting rid of some of the repressive conditions, the government has likewise been active.

DIMENSIONS: One of the hangovers from the United States recession is the increasing competition between union and non-union contractors. To meet competition, many union contractors are looking seriously at the open or double breasted shop. How about Canada’s experience in this area?

SOSIN: We’ve grown up in a different manner with the non-union operation than has the American contractor. But regardless if you’re a union contractor, a union leader, or a union employee, you have to believe in one thing: business comes first.

If you are a union contractor and you intend to remain one then you have a responsibility to unionized construction. When you can’t get the business by using union labor—and there are some situations where a non-union contractor can get it by paying cheaper wages—then you simply have to sit down and negotiate a better arrangement with the union.

You asked me so I’ll answer with my own observation. All the talk in the United States about going double breasted, and all the seminars and educational sessions to show a contractor how to set up a double breasted operation—why that’s all an exercise in avoiding the tougher responsibility of changing the union.

DIMENSIONS: That’s a statesmanlike approach to a major problem but it takes time and is rather difficult in the face of criticism that unions can’t or won’t change enough?

SOSIN: Enough is a relative word. Remember: business comes first. A union leader can’t survive in a vacuum and he’s as interested in expanding unionized construction opportunities as anyone. He’ll change if he has to—or he’ll become a dinosaur watching his members’ work go off to someone else.

DIMENSIONS: You were one of the leading proponents in Canada for the Ontario contractor group to affiliate with iaWCC/GDCI. What led you to this decision?

SOSIN: There were a number of advantages that affiliation would provide for us and we could help strengthen iaWCC/GDCI as our contribution.

We looked over the situation carefully and iaWCC/GDCI was the only organization that could claim undisputable, representation to contractors involved in all wall and ceiling work.

At the same time, we would be provided with direct access to the top union leadership, an inside track as to what the United States government and agencies are doing, plus there are the other services and communications package that iaWCC/GDCI provides. All in all, we felt that affiliation would be mutually beneficial. Like it or not, our countries are tied pretty close together.

DIMENSIONS: You earlier mentioned a fundamental difference between the two countries with regard
to union vs. non-union construction. Situs picketing—as Americans largely understand it—is a reality in Canada. Do you have any significant difficulties with it?

SOSIN: We have it here, but it's used primarily against a union contractor who isn't living up to the terms of his agreement and the union with whom he has the dispute doesn't feel it can bring him into line quickly enough. Speed is the big motive here.

Speaking as a Canadian contractor, it's no big thing and nothing to get especially excited about. In the United States, though, it seems largely an emotional subject where mere mention of the two words gets everyone in the industry tightened up, on the defensive.

DIMENSIONS: It's a little more than that. The major objection to situs picketing in the United States is injury to an innocent third party, whether he's shut down over a dispute on materials, organizing, or whatever. They're legitimate fears, don't you think?

SOSIN: These problems—or fears as you call them—have to be documented. The who, what and why of such instances need information and documentation. For instance, how many parties have been injured by these instances in the past?

DIMENSIONS: Documentation may be well served but you don't need to prove a gun can kill to dislike its being pointed at you?

SOSIN: It helps, though, to know if there are any bullets in the gun. If the unions get situs picketing and they abuse it, what have they got?

Nothing—and plenty of it.

The unions know they must adapt. They must concern themselves with the factors that promote non-union work while also justifying their existence to members and, more than ever, to potential new members. Situs picketing alone isn't enough—and unions know it.

DIMENSIONS: Then why all the emphasis and fuss by unions?

SOSIN: I personally think it's defensive. Understandable defensiveness at that. When a non-union contractor comes onto the union job and his conditions are unlike the union working conditions, then the working conditions and security for all unions are threatened either directly or indirectly. It's not surprising that they react; who wouldn't under such conditions.

DIMENSIONS: Stan, you are on leave from your company to do industry work. Is this a permanent move on your part or do you see yourself moving back in with Gino and Frank in the near future?

SOSIN: I personally think it's too early to make any kind of decision along that line. There's so much to do. It goes without saying that Canadian construction is in for some severe changes in the coming years and I, certainly, want to be a part of that.

But it is getting so that in any country you name, the future potential for a contractor is a group matter. The day of the individual contractor being on the receiving end of issues decided elsewhere is over: he's organizing himself now and will be participating in those decisions wherever they are made.

Whether I'm the one functioning in that capacity for ISCO is an academic question. The rule is: business comes first. Anyone who forgets that won't be doing his job and, consequently, won't be along in any position.