Canada’s ISCA Stages Comeback

Interior Systems Contractors in Canada’s (Golden Triangle) Complete Resurgence With Comprehensive Program of Labor Relations, Educational Services, Publications, and Social Activities

What makes the Interior Systems Contractors Association of Ontario so different from most wall and ceiling industry chapters is that even when it was down and out it was up and running.

Originally incorporated in 1971 under a different name, the wall and ceiling organization got off to a fast start but hit the doldrums in the late 70s. Even with its difficulties, the chapter managed to keep up a flow, however anemic, of services and activities.

Pride and potential being what they are, though, a number of interested contractors made the determination to get their chapter moving again. They helped finance the resurgence which today finds the 58-member ISCA at the forefront of construction activities throughout the area from Niagara Falls to Oshawa—referred to as Canada’s “Golden Horseshoe Area.”

Not only does the chapter now maintain a complete schedule of local, national, and international activities, but it is the accredited union bargaining agent for all residential unionized wall and ceiling contractors sector in the metropolitan Toronto area along with carrying out a comprehensive educational and communications services program.

As impressive as it appears, the comeback didn’t come easy. A few fundamental changes in operating procedure and philosophy were first initiated.

Make quick changes . . .

In order to more properly reflect the nature of the members’ business, the organization’s name was changed to Interior Systems Contractors Association of Ontario. Then, to assure adequate funds to continue operating efficiently, a $-cents-an-hour industry promotion fund was negotiated with the unions.

Fulltime management capabilities came with the hiring of Robert “Bob” McKean as the chapter manager.

Sensing the growth potential, more
wall and ceiling contractors joined the chapter and within a year or two it had not only returned to its old level of strength and influence but was rapidly reaching for new levels of membership and activities.

Indeed, the comeback was so complete that by 1982 ISCA qualified to apply to the Ontario Labor Relations Board for accreditation to negotiate every two years the fitters agreement with the International Brotherhood of Carpenters, Local #675 on behalf of all union contractors. The qualifications demand that the bargaining agent’s members employ more than 50% of all union fitters, and that the employers also account for at least 50% of the contractors in the jurisdiction.

This accreditation came through in 1982. Only four years later, 1986, an equally important accreditation approval came through from the Ontario Labor Relations Board, this one for ISCA to negotiate also the tapers’ residential agreements with the Brotherhood of Painters, Local #1891.

When ISCA recently held its annual meeting this past April, the organization was at a new peak in membership level, programs, activities and influence. It is at this Organizational meeting that the contractors select their 7-member Board of Directors for the coming year which in turn selects the executive officers of the chapter.

The current president of ISCA is Adolf Gust, of Paragon Drywall Systems, Concord, now in his third year as a Board member. Serving with “Gus” on the executive committee are: Vern Zapfe, vice president, of Scarborough; Peter Berry, secretary, of Scarborough, and Alex Muzzo, treasurer, of Toronto.

Other ISCA directors include Bruce Woods, of Scarborough; Elmo Colussi, of Toronto, and Oscar Chiarotto, of Toronto.

“It’s really been a long, but rewarding pull,” explains ISCA’s manager Bob McKean. “Our principle function, of course, has been in negotiating solely—or by accreditation—the residential agreements with the Carpenters and Painters, and jointly—by designation—with the Acoustical Association of Ontario to negotiate the I-C-I (industrial-commercial-institutional) agreements with the same unions.

“We negotiate a new agreement every two years and this has been instrumental in maintaining a competitive stance for union contractors in the ‘Golden Horseshoe’ area.”

To ISCA President Adolf Gust, the ability of ISCA to work directly with the unions has had far more reaching benefits.

“You have to keep in mind,” Gus explained, “that Toronto—indeed the whole of Ontario—didn’t experience the convulsions that other unionized areas in North America experienced.

“We managed to avoid the onslaught of the non-union penetration into our markets simply because the unions and management recognized the problems early and made whatever adjustments were needed to cope with the challenge.

“ISCA is still a totally union organization,” he continued, “and our contractors today dominate the same work that we had when this whole...
For McKean, the major element of the ISCA organization is labor relations, but he oversees other association services such as educational and promotion. ISCA schedules one large international trip annually and also conducts an annual ladies night dinner-dance.

union vs. non-union fiasco was—in some cases, still is—ripping up the union contractor ranks.

"Because we are accredited in residential and designated in ICI other contractors live and die by our agreements. That's why so many union contractors are coming into the chapter: they want some input into the agreements that we negotiate. And, believe me, we—and the unions—want that input. That's how we've managed to get agreements that have kept us competitive."

Gust's remarks have factual support. In Ontario, there are only about 100 union contractors, and perhaps another 100 non-union, small scale contractors. ISCA contractors are responsible for some 80% of the work volume in Toronto, and more than 50% throughout Ontario.

Still, Gust admits that the level of economic activity in the Toronto area had much to do with the maintenance of union contractor strength.

"It's true," he emphasized, "that the amount of work in Toronto has remained constant for the past 6-7 years. The expression, 'business as usual,' would be appropriate.

"Four years ago, non-union construction was an issue and the work had dropped off a bit. That's when we negotiated an agreement without an increase and this prompt action chopped off any competitive advantage they enjoyed. We were able, I think, to drill into the union the danger of allowing non-union contractors to get even a slight foothold. I mean let's face it: it would have been the unions' own membership that would have comprised these non-union work forces: they have no way or desire to train anyone."

In the last few years, ISCA, AAO and the unions have begun moving closer on installing an effective apprenticeship program. Not all the details
are yet in place, but contractors see the
need for younger mechanics. Within a
few months, an 8-man committee will
be formed—two each from the unions
and from the contractor groups—with
the objective of formulating a final
plan.

Lawyers have already been retained
to make the necessary applications to
the appropriate government agencies
which will assist in financing and
development.

"Our workforce is growing older,"
Gust observed, "and we need to con-
cern ourselves with maintaining a
stable, trained body of mechanics."

"Last year," adds McKean, "we ran
out of people and, frankly, there hasn't
been all that much new blood coming
into the industry. Now we'll go out and
recruit good people, starting as early
as this summer. Our goal is to have
classes running this fall."

"We all want good, trained drywall
mechanics," concludes Gust, "and we
hope to have our own teachers,
facilities, and premises."

**Workers comp issue . . .**

As effective as the union relations
program is, though, a newly emerging
controversy—and one that has all con-
tractors in Ontario concerned—has
prompted ISCA to react.

This is the growing Workers Com-
pensation issue which is trying to
balance a situation of increasing
benefit payouts with insufficient in-
come. Liberal rulings over the years by
the Workers Compensation Board and
other government officials have enabl-
ed many workers to get on the dole—
and the escalating costs have reached
a point where private sector payments
are inadequate to meet obligations.

The government's reaction has been
to tighten up the premium rules, ex-
tracting more and more funds from
contractors. If a contractor's ex-
perience rating is higher than the in-
dustry average the contractor can be
assessed a premium of double in ad-
tional charges.

"We've got to protect our contrac-
tors' interests," Gust says, "so we've
retained a consultant—an expert in
Worker Compensation issues—to serve
as a liaison between ISCA members
and the Workers Compensation Board
(WCB). Not all contractors are well
versed in the appeal processes available
to them in worker compensation cases,
so now we have an expert to lead us
through the labyrinth."

With a fund already in serious
deficit and with growing future com-
mitments, the double assessment figure
has been instrumental in raising funds
to cover the shortages. The only trou-
ble with this response is that
bureaucrats are free to continue liberal
rulings.

"Individual cases have benefited
from this three-year-old program of
ours," says McKean. "It's not that we
don't want disability and pensions
paid, but a government official finds
it rather easy to approve payments for
questionable cases—and these
payments 'are indexed to cost of
living—when someone else is paying
the costs. Contractors are already pay-
ings a stiff price for workers
compensation—and double assessment
can be a big part of overhead . . .
especially when bidding a job."

**Safety program . . .**

As part of the overall safety pro-
gram, ISCA provides an imprinted
safety booklet program for members.

The chapter prepares a digest type
booklet with all current safety rules.
This booklet is intended for distribu-
tion by contractors to their employees,
and provisions are made for the con-

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tractor’s name to be imprinted on each booklet.

“The whole area of safety, workers compensation and cost,” explains McKean, “have become so serious that we’ve developed this 12-page booklet which references the Occupational Health and Safety Acts of 1978 to help address the problem.

“Safety usually isn’t a thrilling subject, so we can’t make the booklet too long or they simply won’t read it. So we keep it short with common sense items and with instructions to each contractor member to make certain that every employee read it.”

Explains Gust, “The Safety Association will come to your shop and conduct safety seminars. But in addition to this, the booklet is provided to each employee by the contractor who makes certain he reads it, and then has the employee sign off that he or she has read it.”

“Later, if there’s an accident or problem the contractor can show that he made a sincere effort to instill good and safe working rules on the job. It’s an obvious safety reference.”

For an Ontario contractor, the reference can be important. In Ontario, fines for safety violations are pegged to the severity of the infraction-and the employee, the supervisor, and the contractor can all be assessed a fine.

**Other activities . . .**

Other activities conducted by ISCA include an annual ladies night dinner-dance, usually held in November. The annual affair last year attracted more than 600 people which included manufacturers, suppliers, unions, industry friends, contractors and their wives. The once-a-year chapter magazine, ISCA, usually contains full coverage of this popular social event.

Once a year, too, the association sponsors an international trip whose objectives include liaisoning with interior systems contractors in other countries, and simply improving international relations.

These annual trips have included attendance as a chapter at various annual conventions of the Association of Wall and Ceiling Industries. ISCA attended AWCI conventions as a group in New Orleans, San Antonio, and Montreal. Other trips include Italy’s famous Milan Fair, and Rome. The 1988 trip will be to Vienna and ISCA people already are arranging visits with contractors there.

In the educational area, ISCA has scheduled supervisory expert Norb Slowikowski, of Chicago, and has also conducted estimating seminars with Harry Carter, of the Carter School of Estimating.

“All in all,” concludes McKean, “ISCA offers a rather attractive package to an interior systems contractor. We’ve been able to restore many of our programs and move into other areas where contractors need and want assistance. I personally feel that any union contractor in Ontario should seriously consider membership.

“It’s nice to know your competition . . . and it’s nice to be part of the industry . . . to help shape and direct it rather than allow others to do the job for you.”

Membership on the ISCA which provides entitlement to all benefits runs $500 first year initiation and then $100 renewal a year. For Ontario contractors interested, write or call:
Interior Systems Contractors
Association of Ontario
Attn: Robert McKean
1 Sparks Avenue
Willowdale, Ontario M2H 2W1
416/494-3453