

Canadian construction workers filling U.S. labour shortage

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The staff at Montreal's Can-Am Immigration have taken tremendous strides to ensure that unemployed Canadian construction workers apply the trade in the United States where their skills are highly needed. Photo courtesy of Can-Am Immigration.

successful the construction market is here in Canada these days," said Parenteau. "But they fail to acknowledge that there are many skilled labourers without work. For example, there are 4,500 electricians in the province of Ontario alone that aren't working."

Meanwhile, the American construction market is severely undermanned and in dire need of skilled labourers. "Last year, there was a real shortage of power linesman in the U.S.," explained Parenteau. "But here in Canada, we have many that are just sitting there doing nothing. So we worked hard to get them temporary work permits and as a result, we ended up taking more than 950 Canadian power linesmen to work in the States."

Parenteau and Can-Am have been involved in immigration issues since 1994. However, it was only recently, as a result of the excessive amount of construction work south of the border, that the firm started to look at getting workers across the board to apply their trade in the U.S.

"We slowly started to examine the rules and we found out that there is a visa in the U.S. that has been around since the 1930s which is available strictly for skilled workers," he explained. "Back in those days, these visas (the H2B visa) were used mostly in the forestry and agricultural markets. But now, we have discovered that construction workers who are fully skilled in their trades are eligible for these visas."

According to Parenteau, the American Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) makes 66,000 of these visas available on an annual basis and last year, only 34,000 of these visas were issued, meaning there is enough room for an extra 32,000 workers to go into the States.

So far, the issuing of these visas to Canadian construction workers is having a good effect. Parenteau explains that in the Maritimes alone, there are more than 35,000 unemployed workers in all fields, which is disastrous. Specific to the industry, there are about 850 members of the United Association of Pipe fitters in Nova Scotia, but only 110 are working.

"It's very frustrating because we as Canadians have never known our rights and privileges to conquer the U.S. market," said Parenteau. "It really gets to me that before we decided to go out there and research the rules, no one was aware that Canadians have every right to go across the border and work."

The major drawback of these visas is that they are temporary in nature as they only last three years. Canadian workers must then return to Canada for a minimum of six months before they can return to work in the States. However, according to Parenteau, this works out really well for the industry because of its seasonal needs, as most construction takes place in the spring and summer seasons.

Over the years, Parenteau expects cross-border labour to grow exponentially. He said that the last time lots of Canadian construction workers went to the U.S. was in the 1950s, therefore it's essential that the lines of communication remain open.

A lack of construction work across Canada has caused some to look for work in the unlikeliest of places: the United States.

With help from Montreal-based immigration brokerage firm Can-Am Immigration, more than 10,000 Canadian construction workers are expected to find work in their fields across the border over the following year.

Although the national construction market is red hot, there still remain a lot of unemployed construction workers that cannot find work here, according to Can-Am's general manager, Richard Parenteau.

"Everyone's talking about how

By doing that, not only do Canadian construction workers actually get jobs, but they get better rates than they ever would in Canada. Most American companies pay skilled workers about US\$45 per hour with pension funds ranging from US\$5-US\$7 per hour.

"The best part about all this is that Americans love the way Canadians work," he noted. "Canadian workers come in, complete the job, and get out."

One American firm that's been very happy with Canadian workers is Kel-Rick Construction Management Inc. in Hudson, New Hampshire. Company spokesperson Johanne Poulin says Kel-Rick is ecstatic with the Canadian workers that have been supplied through Can-Am.

"It's really tough to find real good workers, but Canadians fit that bill perfectly," she said. "This is the greatest thing for us, Can-Am supplied us with 60 visas and so far, we've used most of them. The result has been that we have met our shortage of carpenters, metal stud framing and sheet rock specialists with fabulous workers who are very well trained in what they do."

Poulin adds that Canadian workers will definitely be a part of the company for years to come. She hopes that eventually more union workers will be able to come over from Canada: "If we can compliment an open shop with a union shop, it would be great. To top it off, the benefits for the Carpenters union are wonderful."

Yves St. Germain, the business manager and financial secretary for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in Montreal, agrees that sending over union labour is a great thing.

Starting next year, St. Germain explains that more electrical workers will be needed in the U.S. because of the huge power line that's being built along the west coast, from Washington State to California.

"So far this is a success story. We're sending over people that are very productive and qualified," he said. "Our friends south of the border tell us that our availability of workers is great and their competency is great."

St. Germain added that the union will send over many workers over the next year and that most of those will be through Can-Am because of the company's expertise in immigration issues. Many electricians will be headed out to the American east coast because of a rise of projects there and many linesmen will go to the west coast to work on the power line.

"Last year, we sent 416 workers down to the States and 250 of those went through Can-Am," he said. "The others went through some American lawyers, but we prefer to do it through Can-Am because it's much faster."

Parenteau explained that at first, it took a long time for the visas to go through the INS because it was the first time in decades that they were used for Canadian construction workers. However, now it only takes between eight to 10 weeks for the visas to be approved.

"I hate to repeat this a thousand times," said Parenteau. "But we must be aware of our rights and privileges as Canadians that we have to send over workers to the States. At the same time, this is a welcome invitation for any workers that are unemployed here in Canada to get up and find productive and well-paying jobs across the border."

Can-Am can be reached through the Internet at www.CanAmjobs.com.