

COLUMN

Worker shortage a real dilemma



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When I first moved to B.C. in 1996, I was delighted to find work at a concrete plant that paid more money than I ever made before within 48 hours after stepping off the ferry in Nanaimo.

Jobs were scarce, even low-paying ones, on the east coast where I came from at the time and those that had them desperately hung onto them as if their lives depended on it because, in many respects, they did.

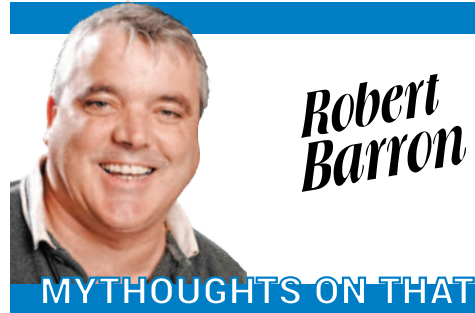
I was a member of the Teamsters Union at the concrete facility and the pay I received reflected the fact that the plant's employees were part of a strong international collective of workers.

I was astonished at how easily and quickly I was hired there, but the new owners of the plant had recently gotten rid of a bunch of employees who were not pulling their weight and were desperate for good workers who could do the job, which required a fair amount of physical ability.

I remember thinking when I was hired that if the plant was in operation in my hometown, there'd be a lineup of people desperate for work that would extend down the road for blocks.

The economy, of course, is cyclical and there have been downturns in B.C.'s economy since then in which finding work was a little harder for people but, for the most part, there always seems to be some sort of work for those that want it and are not too particular.

But the pendulum has swung way out of whack these days and there's lots of jobs available in the region and across the province that,



amazingly to me, nobody seems to be biting at.

Even the concrete plant with the great wages where I began my work career in B.C. has a "Now Hiring!" sign that appears to be perpetually placed in front of the facility.

I recently talked to Julie Scurr, president of the Duncan Cowichan Chamber of Commerce, about the labour shortage and she said it's the result of a perfect storm of circumstances.

She pointed out that a huge skilled-labour shortage that was predicted more than a decade ago has come to fruition, and that is a big factor in today's worker dilemma.

I was covering the education beat at the *Nanaimo Daily News* at the time and I remember labour and government leaders heading to high school classrooms talking to students about the many opportunities in the skilled trades that paid well and offered them excellent futures.

But it appears that most didn't take them up on their advice and now skilled labourers are

retiring much faster than they can be replaced, which is causing problems in the industries in which they are employed.

Added to that, Scurr told me, is the ongoing fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic that knocked many businesses, particularly those in the hospitality and retail industries, on their butts, with many still trying to get back on their feet.

A lot of workers from those businesses were temporarily thrown out of their jobs as their employers were forced to close their doors for extended periods, and now a high percentage of them have moved on to other employment and have chosen not to return.

"There are simply not enough bodies to do all the jobs out there," Scurr told me.

"Immigration is sometimes used to help fill the employment niches, but where will these workers live when they come here? There's no places for them to live in during the ongoing housing crisis. There's no magic bullet to solve this problem, and I expect this will be the way of the world for awhile."

It sure is a completely different world these days than the one I grew up in.

I would have drooled at all the employment opportunities available today when I was a kid.

Robert Barron is a reporter with the Cowichan Valley Citizen. He can be reached at Robert.Barron@cowichanvalleycitizen.com

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