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Growing Union

Local 2404 represents and trains members for work far and wide

By Heather Hudson

Trade unions have a storied history in North America and the Pile Drivers, Divers, Bridge, Dock and Wharf Builders Local 2404 ("Local 2404") is no exception.

With roots as far back as 1920, it has come a long way to its current form: a 675-member organization with a uniquely skilled population that works across the country.

Local 2404's business manager, Darrell Hawk, is gratified to see members finding work far and wide. It wasn't always that way.

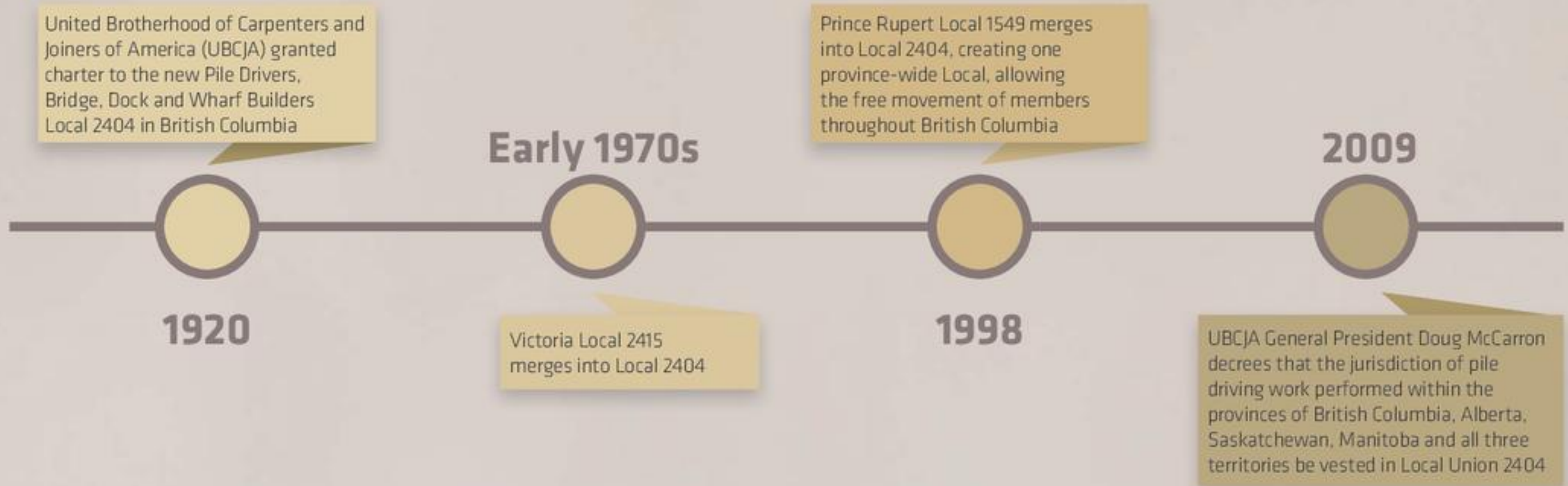
"Until 2009, we didn't have the authority to pursue this [pile driving] craft beyond B.C.," he said.

A decree from the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBCJA) changed everything for Local 2404, allowing it to be recognized as a trade union throughout western Canada and the territories.

"This allows our members and contractors the mobility to pursue opportunities throughout Western Canada," said Hawk.



LOCAL 2404 TIMELINE



This has been a boon to members and contractors alike as an increasingly in-demand trade is given more flexibility.

Some of the work that members of Local 2404 perform include:

- Land foundation work
- Pile driving
- Soil improvement
- Drilling
- Caisson installation
- Bridge foundations and construction
- Marine construction (docks, wharfs)
- Screw piles
- Sheet piling
- Construction diving

Hawk notes that union members are well known in B.C., union headquarters, for its skilled workforce, which translates to steady work, particularly in that province.

“There’s a pretty big fleet of ferries on the west coast here so we do pretty well all the work as far as ferry terminal rebuilding, upgrades and repair work,” he explained.

Superior training

Though membership certainly has its perks for skilled workers, including referrals to a steady stream of work and a pension and benefits plan, it’s the training that is the marquis offering at Local 2404.

A 20,000-square-foot building attached to the union’s office in Delta, B.C. is a certified CWB welding test centre and an Industry Training Authority (ITA)-designated apprenticeship training facility.

In fact, it’s the only place in the country that offers the ITA Certificate of Qualification for Piledrivers and Bridgeworkers. These are skilled workers who construct, install, repair or remove all types of deep piles and caisson foundations and

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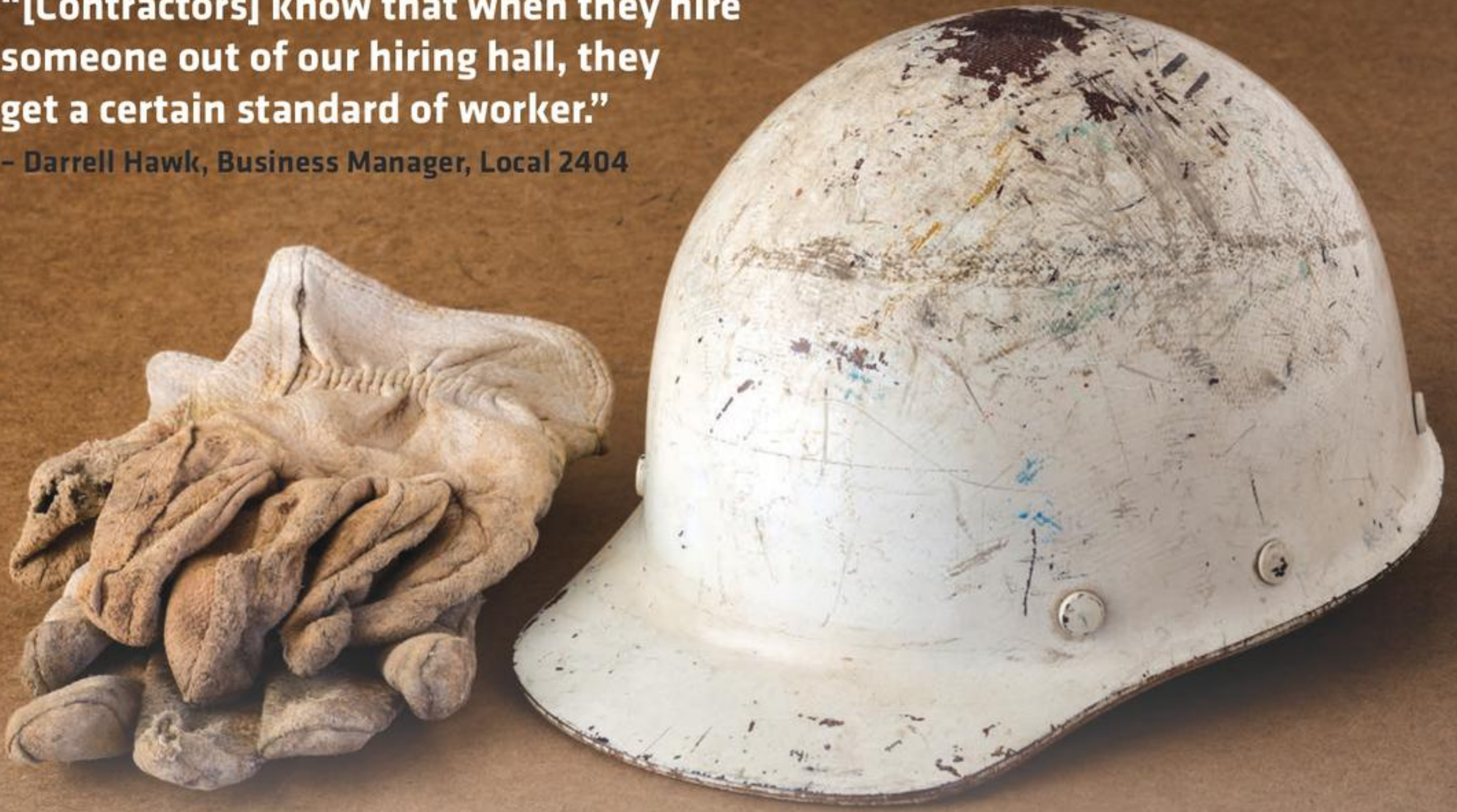
Local 2404 apprentices work on crane assembly in a rigging instruction course

“Right now we’re averaging 60 apprentices over the three years. We try to keep about 20 per level per year. A couple of years back, we were up to 30 to 40 a year, but it’s slowed down a bit work-wise.”

– Darrell Hawk, Business Manager, Local 2404

“[Contractors] know that when they hire someone out of our hiring hall, they get a certain standard of worker.”

– Darrell Hawk, Business Manager, Local 2404



other types of marine installations. Skills learned in the program include fitting, welding, rigging, form-work and timber/concrete construction, seamanship, heavy-duty equipment operation and environmentally safe practices.

The curriculum was just extensively upgraded to include the latest techniques, safety and process improvements. The apprenticeship program takes three years to complete and is a combination of in-class training and on-the-job work.

“The apprenticeship consists of six weeks of classroom training per year for the duration of the program. They must also work 1,200 hours in the industry each year to move to the next level,” said Hawk.

“Right now we’re averaging 60 apprentices over the three years. We try to keep about 20 per level per year. A couple of years back, we were up to 30 to 40 a year, but it’s slowed down a bit work-wise.”

Instructor Casey Nichols does the bulk of the apprenticeship training while Steve Reid offers upgrading courses to all members, including welding recertifications.

A joint apprenticeship and training committee oversees all training initiatives and is funded by employer contributions.

“We provide the training that’s specific to the needs of our contractors. It could be anything from forklift ticket to rigging to fall protection,” said Hawk.

About 60 members of Local 2404 are commercial divers. And because Local 2404 is a chartered local of the UBCJA, divers who are members of affiliated locals across Canada often move to the West Coast looking for work.

“A lot of them come out here and work if there’s work available in commercial or construction diving,” said Hawk.

“They have to come out of a commercial dive school but we do provide ongoing training as needed for upgrading courses as required.”

Hawk says Local 2404 sets the standard for training in the industry, making its members well-respected among contractors.

“They know that when they hire someone out of our hiring hall, they get a certain standard of worker.”

The office’s dispatch system helps both members and contractors. “We offer all signatory contractors a pool of labour. If a contractor needs more people for a job, they phone us and list the skills they require. We dispatch our members to them. When they start wrapping up these projects, they can lay people off, who then book back in to the hiring hall. Another contractor might be busy and they have access to those people. It’s a system that works out for employees and employers.”

Industry upkeep

The affiliation with the UBCJA means Local 2404 is a member of the International Council of Pile Drivers and Divers, consisting of 16 Local Unions throughout North America. The group conducts annual meetings and a convention every two years. The convention features contractors, international unions and speakers on trade-specific items to talk about what’s new in training and the industry at large.

“We figure there are about 10,000 members in our craft throughout North America,” said Hawk. “We put our heads together to improve our trade.”

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Evolving industry

Staying on top of new trends and training requirements is critical to providing a nimble, skilled workforce. Hawk says on the welding side alone there are always new standards, especially in B.C. due to seismic conditions and its designation as an earthquake zone.

"Welding standards have become a lot more stringent, so our welding procedures and processes must change. With our training facility, we can offer members opportunities to come in and practice and be more confident in their skills before they get called out onto a welding job."

Rigging is another area that is continually evolving.

"Everything is becoming bigger and heavier. We can be driving piles that are six feet in diameter and 80 feet long and weigh many tons with a hammer that weighs over 100 tons," explained Hawk. "The UBCJA has developed a 40-hour rigging certification course that our instructors are certified to conduct."



PHOTO BY THOMAS PERKINS / PHOTOS.COM

New members welcome

Hawk says Local 2404 receives a lot of applications and is always looking to bring in new members through the apprenticeship program, ideally younger people in whom they can invest money and training and who will offer longevity in return.

"The preferred method is to take young people who have taken some welding training before they get to us and who then are placed on a probationary period to ensure they're capable of doing the work. We get feedback from the employer and other members they are working with before they start the apprenticeship."

When it comes to employers with whom they work, Hawk says they have good relationships.

"We don't have a lot of issues [with contractors]. We have contractors that have been around for 100 years. Local 2404 will celebrate 100 years in 2020. Some members will work for the same contractors their whole career. While there's no seniority in construction work, we offer a good collective agreement, negotiate it regularly and enforce and maintain fair standards and wages," he said.

Hawk is currently negotiating a three-year contract. ☺