



The offshore petroleum industry operates throughout North America, but there is only one jurisdiction where the industry welcomes unionized construction workers. In Nova Scotia, highly skilled tradespeople from 13 different construction unions have been working under agreements negotiated by the General Presidents' Maintenance Committee (GPMC) since soon after offshore production began in the early 1990s.

The GPMC was initially called upon to negotiate an agreement covering on-shore work involved in retrofitting a drilling platform for use in both drilling and production.

The contractors, Jacobs Catalytic Ltd. (now Jacobs Industrial Services Ltd.) and BMS Offshore (now AMEC Black & McDonald), turned to the GPMC because it could provide a multi-craft agreement tailored to the needs of the project. The complex retrofit had to be completed in less than three months and the contractors needed to employ a compressed workweek with 10-hour shifts, day and night.

The GPMC responded with an agreement that would meet those requirements, and construction workers, primarily from Halifax-Dartmouth local unions, rose to the challenge, delivering nearly 100,000 work hours to complete the project on deadline.

When the retrofit was complete, the contractors were engaged to hook up, commission and start up the platform in the Cohasset-Panuke oil field near Sable Island, about 250 kilometres southeast of Halifax. The GPMC amended the conversion agreement to cover the work offshore, and the building trades offshore industry was born.

The GPMC renewed the offshore agreement for the Cohasset-Panuke project until the field was depleted in 1999. By then, the Sable Offshore Energy Project (SOEP) was starting production of natural gas at three new platforms near Sable Island. The GPMC established another agreement to hook up and commission the SOEP platforms, and amended it in the early 2000s to create the Nova Scotia Offshore Agreement (NSOA), which covered all offshore work. Under that agreement, construction workers have been providing ongoing offshore maintenance and support since 2005.

When the GPMC set out to draft the original offshore agreement, it started by asking the contractors what they needed. Offshore construction is very different from working onshore. The platforms are about the size of a football field. The sites are remote—it takes about an hour and a half to fly to the Sable Island area, and more than 12 hours by boat. Transportation is subject to the weather, and crews may have to stay on the platforms longer than expected.

The agreement needed to be tailored for that environment. It had to accommodate 12-hour days and 14-day rotations, account for workers on standby because of weather conditions, and allow tradespeople to work outside of their jurisdictions when necessary. "There are a limited number of beds for tradespeople on a platform," explains GPMC Executive Director Steve Smillie, "so it's very important for trades to be able to work together and assist each other."

Safety is also a key factor. As John Kelly, Business Manager for Plumbers and Pipefitters Local 56 in Halifax, says, "You're actually sleeping on top of a gas well. There are lots of precautions—safety and evacuation drills, simulated fire drills and so on—but a platform is like a small refinery, and you're eating and living right there."

The local unions that work under the GPMC agreements help facilitate specialized training and safety courses. Jonathon Gaul, Business Manager for Painters and Allied Trades District Council 39, cites a number of such courses, starting with Basic Survival Training. This week-long course is mandatory for anyone working in the offshore industry. It includes a segment simulating conditions when a helicopter is downed at sea, one in which trainees are dunked in a small pool wearing survival gear, and a segment on how to survive injured in a life raft.

There are also courses on topics including Naturally Occurring Radioactive Materials (NORMS), the use of Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA), and dealing with hydrosulfides, a highly toxic and explosive component of sour gas.

Project owners, contractors and unions all work together to ensure that the offshore industry's safety record is excellent. There have been no significant safety incidents since the early 2000s.

The focus on safety also makes a difference in the working environment. Wilf Jarvis, now a Business Representative with the Painters and Allied Trades, has worked on the platforms. In his experience they are safer than many on-shore job sites. "We were about an hour-and-a-half chopper ride from the mainland, so you had to be careful and everyone worked together to keep the site safe," he says.

He also says that the working conditions were great: "The food was really good, the living quarters were excellent and there was lots to do after shifts—a gym, pool, darts, movies...."

Being dunked in a pool during safety training, or winning at pool after a shift, may be the stuff of personal memories, but the real benefit of the offshore agreement for unionized workers is good-paying, long-term jobs.

Since the GPMC began working with the Nova Scotia petroleum industry in the early 1990s, its agreements have provided hundreds of thousands of work hours to unionized construction tradespeople. That work has helped to keep people in the region and sustain the local economy.

Mark Healy, president of AMEC Black & McDonald, believes that GPMC's presence has also helped improve the competitive environment in the offshore industry. "I believe the agreement has created a certain expectation about how workers will be treated and compensated," he says. "When contractors bid for work under this agreement, we all have a common starting point and have to differentiate ourselves on the basis of skills, experience, safety performance, quality and track record in a hydrocarbon environment."

AMEC Black & McDonald recently won a contract for the Deep Panuke project, Encana's gas development in the Sable Island area, which is expected to serve markets in eastern Canada and the U.S. until the mid-2020s. The company's successful bid was based on rates from the GPMC agreement.

"The agreement has never hampered us," Healy says—in fact, it delivers a number of advantages. One of the key benefits is that it covers all of the construction tradespeople working offshore. "We don't have to deal with a different agreement for every trade. Everyone is aligned around a set of acceptable terms and everyone knows the rules and expectations," he says.

Healy also values the flexibility of the multi-trade agreement. In rare circumstances when, for unforeseen reasons, a particular trade isn't available, the agreement allows a tradesperson from a different local to help out. If weather prevents a new crew from arriving at a platform on time, the trades can support each other without issue. "We're careful not to abuse that provision," Healy says. "We work hard as a company to limit the cross-jurisdictional use of trades. The accommodations built into the agreement create trust among the stakeholders and we work to maintain that."

"Both unions and companies respect the agreement and live by it. When we have issues, the GPMC helps find acceptable solutions that prevent work disruptions, which is important for our company's reputation in the oil industry."

Healy believes that the GPMC's Nova Scotia Offshore Agreement has created a very stable labour environment that is unique in North America. "Other locations don't have the same level of harmony," he says. "The offshore industry is not a union environment but, because of the trust and stability we have here, our clients honour the GPMC agreement."

The GPMC/NMC

The General Presidents' Maintenance Committee/National Maintenance Council for Canada (GPMC/NMC) is an alliance of 13 international unions that negotiates and administers labour agreements designed to facilitate maintenance at industrial plants. Through the GPMC/NMC, employers can negotiate single contracts covering up to 13 building trade unions.

Now celebrating its 60th anniversary, the GPMC/NMC administers agreements in eight out of 10 Canadian provinces. These agreements account for over 28 million work hours, or 14,000 full-time jobs, each year.



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