



THIS CONTRACTOR WAS NON-UNION FOR YEARS. HERE'S WHY HE'LL NEVER GO BACK.

Mechanical and HVAC contractors across Wisconsin continue to face labor shortages, increasing project complexity, safety requirements, and pressure to complete projects on schedule. This article explores why one former non-union contractor chose to partner with Steamfitters Local 601 and how access to trained union labor helped with growth.

For many general contractors, the idea of unionizing feels like giving up control, flexibility or margin. Randy Lenover initially felt the same way. He ran a non-union HVAC operation for years before joining Local 601. Today, as the owner of Merchants Refrigeration and Mechanical, his team has grown from 3 technicians to 10 in under two years, and he says it's one of the best business decisions he's ever made.

HOW DOES UNION VS. NON-UNION IMPACT HIRING?

If you're running a non-union shop, you know the drill. You post a job, sort through applications, and hope the person who shows up has more than a certificate and good intentions. When a big project lands, you scramble. When it slows down, you're stuck carrying payroll you may not be able to afford.

Union membership changes that equation. [Local 601 functions as a living talent pipeline](#) offering trained workers who are vetted through a rigorous apprenticeship program. They are available when you need them and not on your books when you don't. No guesswork. No long-term payroll risk on a short-term project.

ARE UNION APPRENTICES BETTER TRAINED?

Not all skilled tradespeople are trained equally. Randy notes that [union apprentices](#) come better prepared than most graduates of technical college programs. Where a

technical college might spend a single class period on something like brazing, Local 601's program includes full training modules with formal testing. Apprentices can also specialize in pipe fitting, service, or other tracks, so the worker you bring on is actually suited to the job you need done.

The result? Fewer mistakes, fewer callbacks, and crews you can trust on your most demanding projects.

Taking my shop from non-union to union was one of the best business decisions I've ever made.

- Randy Lenover, Owner, Merchants Refrigeration & Mechanical

HOW DOES UNION TRAINING IMPACT SAFETY?

Under Local 601's collective bargaining agreement, apprentices must complete a mandatory OSHA 30 certification and First Aid/CPR training before they can advance.

For contractors pursuing large commercial or regulated projects, this matters. Many job sites require strict safety compliance as a condition of the contract. Union workers arrive already meeting those standards, reducing your liability exposure and strengthening your reputation with project owners who have options.

HOW DOES LOCAL 601 HELP CONTRACTORS SOLVE LABOR SHORTAGES?

One of the least talked-about advantages of union affiliation is what it does for your recruiting pitch. Local 601's health coverage, pension plan, and 401(k) options consistently outperform what most non-union contractors can offer on their own. Randy describes the union health insurance as the best he's ever had.

For contractors, this cuts both ways. You get a powerful recruiting tool without having to build or manage a competitive benefits package yourself. The union handles negotiations and administration. You focus on running your business.

When a large project comes in, union contractors can

scale up quickly by drawing from the labor pool without committing to permanent hires. When the project wraps, that overhead doesn't follow you into the slow season. That kind of flexibility is nearly impossible to replicate as a non-union shop, where every hire is a longer-term decision.

Union wages are also generally higher than non-union pay.¹ Union apprentices also get paid while training, reducing financial risk compared to college tuition.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON FEARS OF GOING UNION?

The most common objection Randy hears from non-union contractors is simple: I don't want someone else telling me how to run my business. He used to feel exactly the same way.

What changed his mind wasn't an argument. It was experience. In practice, union membership doesn't strip away your authority as a contractor. It establishes a clear, consistent framework that actually gives you something valuable: predictability. You know your costs, you know your obligations, and so does everyone on your crew.

For contractors who run their businesses with integrity and treat their workers well, that structure doesn't get in the way, it reinforces what they were already doing. The agreement simply puts it in writing.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The skilled trades are facing a serious talent shortage. The contractors who will win the next decade are the ones who can attract, train, and retain the best workers in the field. Union affiliation with Local 601 offers a direct path to all three. Randy Lenover went union because the business case was undeniable. Better workers. Stronger benefits. Real flexibility. Measurable growth. If you're a non-union contractor who's been on the fence, his advice is straightforward: stop leaving those advantages on the table.

Interested in learning more about what Local 601 membership could mean for your business? [Reach out](#) to start the conversation.

Sources: ¹[bls.gov](https://www.bls.gov)