

Construction trades bill hot topic of discussion

BY ANGELA HALL, THE LEADER-POST NOVEMBER 26, 2009

Acrimony over a proposed new law affecting the construction industry could come to a head today as a legislative committee meets on Bill 80.

The Saskatchewan Party government wants the committee to wrap up its work so the bill can pass before the legislative sitting ends in one week. But the NDP says work on the controversial piece of legislation still needs to be done, which could mean the bill won't come to a final vote until the spring.

The bill would amend the construction industry labour relations act to allow unions not currently recognized in Saskatchewan's construction industry to organize in the province. It would also allow for "wall-to-wall" certification, so various trades at one location might be covered by the same union rather than having unionized workers recognized by a trade-specific union.

Labour Minister Rob Norris said there was an informal agreement with the Opposition to consider passing the legislation this fall, as long as the human services committee dedicated a certain amount of time to the bill.

"The Opposition could block this but by so doing they'd be going back on that gentlemen's agreement," said Norris, who is scheduled to appear before the committee for two hours today.

"We want to make sure that our agenda -- the agenda of creating more democratic labour relations -- continues to move forward. ... Our goal is to ensure that it passes at the earliest possible date."

But NDP MLA Len Taylor said the Opposition never agreed to ensure Bill 80 could pass this fall, having only agreed to a certain number of hours for going over the bill with the minister and for public consultation.

When those hours are complete, committee members can go clause-by-clause through the bill before it returns to the chamber for a third reading, Taylor said. He said if the government is desperate to pass Bill 80 this fall then it should have planned accordingly.

"They've chosen now the week before the legislature adjourns to bring this forward in sort of an emergency manner," said Taylor.

"There's still work to be done on the bill. They can't rush that through," said Taylor, adding it's difficult to say how long the work will take.

Unionized construction workers currently make up about 20 per cent of the industry in Saskatchewan.

The building and construction trades council has denounced the proposed legislation, contending the current system works well and the bill could destabilize the industry. But Bill 80 has been touted by business groups that say the changes will help attract workers to the province.

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