

Trade union members protest Bill 80 outside Regina hotel

BY ANGELA HALL, LEADER-POST DECEMBER 15, 2009

REGINA — Unionized construction workers braved -33 C temperatures early Tuesday morning to picket what they call a "phoney" union and protest proposed new legislation from the Saskatchewan Party government.

About 50 members of the building trades paced back and forth in front of Hotel Saskatchewan for half an hour in advance of a speech delivered by an official with the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC). At issue is Bill 80, a controversial piece of provincial legislation opposed by trade unions but welcomed as long overdue by CLAC, a union that will be permitted to organize in Saskatchewan's construction sector once the bill becomes law.

"We're out here this morning because the Christian Labour Association is inside telling mistruths about Bill 80," said Terry Parker with the province's building and construction trades council, as he delivered a speech from the box of a pick-up truck parked at the curb.

Parker contended the bill will pave the way to lower wages, destabilize the industry and effectively permit employers and not the workers to select the union of their choosing. Several workers carried signs reading "Say No to Bill 80" or "CLAC - The Phoney Union."

But inside, CLAC regional director Brad Bent praised the proposed law as he spoke to about 20 people at a breakfast sponsored by the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, a western Canada think-tank.

"I think many people here in Saskatchewan view the legislation by the government today as we're finally catching up with many other jurisdictions in Canada," Bent said.

Only about 20 per cent of the construction industry in Saskatchewan is unionized. There are many more workers who would like to join a union — but they want more choice, Bent said.

Current rules in Saskatchewan dictate that workers in construction join the union specific to their craft. The choice between no union at all or the government-designated union is a "monopolistic approach," Bent said.

"There are pockets of what I will call un-freedom in Canada and one of these areas is in Saskatchewan's construction industry labour relations act," Bent said. "How many of us think that there should only be one cell phone provider or one chain of gas stations or one supermarket chain?"

Bill 80 would allow the current system to continue but would also open the door to unions such as CLAC and the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union, and would permit "wall-to-wall"

certifications where everyone at a site is represented by the same union.

Bent dismissed the contention that the bill, expected to become law in spring 2010, will lead to lower wages. He also refuted criticism that CLAC is the "employer's choice" of union.

"We adhere to the labour board organizing rules and regulations that the worker is the one who chooses the union by vote," he said following his speech. "The workers choose CLAC or another union, not the company, not the union."

CLAC isn't a stranger to controversy, having raised the ire of organized labour earlier this fall when it proposed Saskatchewan's minimum wage be increased overall, but also be discounted by 10 per cent for workers under 21.

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