

Sask. Party moving forward on Bill 80

BY JAMES WOOD, SASKATCHEWAN NEWS NETWORK; CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MAY 6, 2010

The Saskatchewan Party government is pushing ahead with plans to pass controversial labour legislation affecting the construction industry, even with no report from the legislature committee that spent hours holding public hearings on Bill 80 last year.

Construction unions angered by the potential effects of the legislation say that breaks a commitment made to them by Advanced Education, Employment and Labour Minister Rob Norris.

The legislature's human services committee was originally supposed to deliver its report on Bill 80 in last fall's sitting of the legislature but with less than three weeks left in the spring session, Norris said Wednesday that neither he nor officials have seen a report.

Terry Parker, business manager of the Saskatchewan Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council, said the committee hearings now look to be waste of taxpayers' dollars and the participant's time.

"From what the minister was saying, it sounds like they were going to go ahead regardless and the whole committee process was a sham," he said in an interview at the legislature after the NDP raised the issue in question period.

Parker, who met with Norris Tuesday evening, showed a September 2009 letter from Norris to one of the council's affiliated unions that said "I can assure you that the contents of the report of the standing committee ... will be studied by Ministry officials to identify the implications of the recommendations."

The proposed legislation would open the door to unions currently not allowed to organize in the province's construction sector, and end the requirement that unionized workers in construction join the union specific to their trade.

The construction unions operating currently in Saskatchewan say the bill will set up parallel systems, drive down wages and allow employers to foist unions of their choice on employees.

Parker said those unions are also unhappy with Norris over comments he made when Bill 80 was introduced in March of 2009. He told reporters that no business entities or construction firms were consulted in the drafting of the legislation.

But a freedom of information request produced a letter from October 2008 addressed to Norris from Saskatchewan Construction Association president Michael Fougere that called on the government to revise "abandonment" regulations and "end the monopoly of the Building Trades in the construction industry."

Those in fact are two of the major provisions of Bill 80.

Norris told reporters Wednesday that he did not consider that letter to be consultation, noting that the ministry receives multitudes of correspondence.

Even though there is no report from the legislative committee, Norris said he has a good sense of what took place during the public hearings. But while much of the testimony at the hearings was in opposition to the legislation, the government will pass Bill 80, essentially unchanged from when it was first introduced, by the end of the spring sitting of the legislature.

Norris acknowledged there are stakeholders opposed to the bill, but the government believes it "will serve the public interest of this province."

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