

Sask. trade unions unhappy with Bill 80

BY ANGELA HALL, LEADER-POST JUNE 18, 2009



Randy Nichols, president of the Building Trades Council, speaks to construction workers at the Saskatchewan Legislature on Wednesday.

Photograph by: Roy Antal, Leader-Post

REGINA — Carpenters, electricians, pipefitters and other unionized workers in the construction trades flooded the steps of the Legislative Building on Wednesday as a committee began hearings inside on a bill they fear will make sweeping changes to their industry.

Most of the more than 200 people who gathered had to wait outside the building due to the small size of the hearing room, and attempts by NDP MLAs on the committee to move the proceedings to a bigger venue were thwarted by Saskatchewan Party members.

"We thought we were going to be made part of this," said Kyle Abday, a carpenter-scaffolder, as he waited on the sidewalk. "We just want to know what's going on. It directly affects our livelihood. It's how we make a living."

Indoors, the Saskatchewan Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council called Bill 80 — An Act to Amend the Construction Industry Labour Relations Act — unjust and unnecessary.

The council's business manager, Terry Parker, noted there hasn't been a work disruption due to labour relations in 17 years and the construction industry is booming.

"Why would you risk destabilizing a system that's produced such stellar results?" Parker said in his presentation.

"Why would try to fix a system that isn't broken, and why would you do it without first talking to the men and women who work everyday in the industry about what they think would be best?"

Presently, construction workers who work for unionized sites must join the union associated with their particular trade. The current labour relations system governing the construction industry — about 20 per cent of which is unionized — sees collective agreements bargained provincially on a trade-by trade-basis.

Passage of Bill 80 would open the door to unions that couldn't previously unionize construction companies here. A union could also organize a company on a multi-trade or "all employee" basis, so everyone at a location could potentially be under the same union.

The proposed legislation received full support from presenters such as Michael Fougere with the Saskatchewan Construction Association.

"We endorse the changes because we believe that providing choice for workers on which union represents them is inherently fair," said Fougere.

He added that some Saskatchewan residents currently work in Alberta's construction industry as members of the Christian Labour Association of Canada or the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, unions that aren't currently recognized in the construction industry here. Those workers could come with their union to work in Saskatchewan if the law passes, Fougere said.

Fougere also "flatly denied" the argument that opening up the system will result in lower wages.

"We have a competitive market. We're looking for workers all the time," he said.

However, the building trades' Parker rejected the idea the bill will give employees more choice, and argued Bill 80 will see construction companies be able to pick the union they want to deal with.

Another full day of hearings on Bill 80 is set for Thursday.

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