

Sask. unions, business groups debate construction labour law

BY ANGELA HALL, LEADER-POST JUNE 18, 2009

REGINA — Unions and business groups clashed Thursday over whether or not a proposed new law aimed at the construction industry will help cure Saskatchewan's shortage of skilled workers.

"Legislation is not going to attract those workers. Jobs are going to attract those workers," said Graeme Aitken, with the International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers, at public hearings held Thursday into Bill 80.

Aitken implored the committee of MLAs not to "gamble" on legislation.

But an umbrella group of Saskatchewan business organizations told the committee it thinks more investment will flow into the province if the bill amending the Construction Industry Labour Relations Act bill passes.

Proposed changes include allowing unions not currently recognized in Saskatchewan's construction industry, like the Christian Labour Association of Canada (CLAC), to organize in the province. Among other changes, the legislation would also allow for so-called "wall-to-wall" certification, so various trades at one location might be covered by the same union rather than going trade-by-trade. Unionized construction workers, represented by specific trade unions, currently make up about 20 per cent of the industry in Saskatchewan.

Representatives from the Saskatchewan Business Council said it thinks companies such as Ledcor, which currently deals with CLAC in other provinces, will come and bid on jobs in Saskatchewan if the bill passes.

More bidders hopefully also means more value for one's money, said Marilyn Braun-Pollon with the council.

But it's "fear-mongering" to say workers' wages would go down if wall-to-wall certifications are allowed, she said after the presentation. "There's no evidence it would be a race to the bottom either," she said.

Council representative Michael Fougere said the benefits of Bill 80 in attracting workers would be something that's seen over time.

"You'll have more companies in the province doing work that need workers ... it's not going to be a revolutionary change, it's an evolutionary change over time," he said.

But Aitken contended former Saskatchewan residents who are members of CLAC in Alberta joined because it was the union at that particular unionized work site, and suggested those same workers would join a trade union here if it meant getting good work.

"What I'm concerned about is taking a system that seems to be working and re-making it in a manner that we're not sure if it'll work," he said in an interview after his presentation.

Hearings into Bill 80 resume June 23.

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