

CLAC makes pitch in favour of Bill 80

BY JAMES WOOD, THESTARPHOENIX.COM JUNE 23, 2009



File photo: SFL president Larry Hubich

Photograph by: Don Healy, Canwest file photo

REGINA — The union that could be one of the main beneficiaries of the Saskatchewan Party government's proposed changes to the construction industry labour relations act made its pitch in favour of Bill 80 Tuesday.

But as the legislature's human service committee resumed hearings on the bill, the Christian Labour Association of Canada also came under fire from the umbrella group for provincial unions, with the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) describing the CLAC as an employer-dominated union that will help drive down wages and benefits for construction workers.

Presently, construction workers who work for unionized sites must join the union associated with their particular trade. Bargaining is conducted on a provincewide basis by trade.

Bill 80 would open the door to unions — such as the CLAC and Communications, Energy and Paperworkers — that couldn't previously unionize construction companies in Saskatchewan. A union could also organize a company on a multi-trade or "wall to wall" basis as practised by the CLAC, so everyone at a location could potentially be under the same union.

Paul deJong, the prairies director of the CLAC, told the committee the bill will create "fair competition" among unions and accused the building trades unions that oppose the legislation as wanting to stifle that.

"They want to preserve an unfair monopoly. They don't want competition. They don't want construction employees to have a choice," he told the committee.

But deJong also faced questioning by the NDP's Andy Iwanchuk about the CLAC's relationship with Alberta-based construction giant Ledcor CMI Ltd. as the union representing all of the company's hourly workers.

"Now, when Ledcor opens another division to deal with any particular kind of element of construction or in another jurisdiction, the workers who are hired by them say, 'CLAC has represented the Ledcor workers across Canada,' and we get that phone call and we move forward," said deJong.

Last week, Ledcor's Tom Brown told the committee the company had essentially been prevented from coming to Saskatchewan by existing construction industry legislation because it keeps out the CLAC.

Brown said the company had a strong relationship with the union because of its wall-to-wall certification and the fact that its collective agreements do not require subcontractors to be unionized by the CLAC.

But the Christian Labour Association of Canada isn't regarded so favourably by the majority of the union movement.

Saskatchewan Federation of Labour president Larry Hubich accused the CLAC of "anti-democratic practices" such as conducting ratification votes before a wage schedule is negotiated, permitting management to take part in union meetings and enticing employees with interest-free payday loans.

He said research done by the Canadian Labour Congress showed that in some jurisdictions, 25 to 40 per cent of agreements involving the CLAC are voluntary recognition agreements from employers that don't want legitimate trade unions.

"Bill 80 is designed to prevent workers working for non-unionized employers from certifying that employer. Bill 80 will diminish the ability of employees on a construction site from organizing and forming a union," said Hubich.

"Bill 80 does this by allowing a company, for example a contractor from outside the province, to strike an agreement with an employer-friendly union, sign an agreement with them and anyone who works for that employer will have to work for that union chosen by that employer."

But deJong said there are myths being perpetuated about the CLAC because it does not take the "adversarial" approach of other unions.

He said its collective agreements match up with those negotiated by other unions and its more than 50,000 members across Canada would not put up with the union if was not looking out for their interests.

The union is opening an office in Saskatoon on July 1 as it expands into Saskatchewan.

Beyond construction, other areas it is looking at for members include retail, mining, health care and hospitality.

DeJong said the CLAC would not intentionally target employers who are already unionized but did not rule it out if the union is approached by employees.

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