

Union blasted for supporting Bill 80

BY JAMES WOOD, SASKATCHEWAN NEWS NETWORK; CANWEST NEWS SERVICE JUNE 24, 2009

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 (CLAC) also came under fire from the umbrella group for provincial unions, with the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL) describing CLAC as an employer-dominated union that will 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 and 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 CLAC's relationship with Alberta-based construction giant Ledcor CMI Ltd. as the union representing all the company's hourly workers.

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

Saskatchewan Federation of Labour president Larry Hubich accused the CLAC of "anti-democratic practices" such as conducting ratification votes before a wage schedule was 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 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.

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