

Trade unions at odds over construction sector

BY ANGELA HALL, LEADER-POST JUNE 25, 2009

The Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union heartily endorsed Bill 80 at public hearings Wednesday, putting itself at odds with construction trade unions and the umbrella group for organized labour in Saskatchewan.

Changes to the construction industry labour relations act would end the requirement that unionized workers in the construction sector belong to the union specific to their trade, allowing CEP to organize at construction companies in Saskatchewan for the first time.

"We just want to be able to put ourselves on the menu and help defend workers if they so choose us," said Josh Coles, CEP's national construction strategy co-ordinator, after addressing a legislative committee examining the Saskatchewan Party government's proposed law.

CEP is already in Saskatchewan in non-construction industries, representing employees at some of the provinces Crown corporations as well workers in sectors such as potash and forestry.

Coles contended the union, which got active in Alberta and B.C.'s construction industry about four years ago, can help address the skilled labour shortage in Saskatchewan's construction sector if Bill 80 passes.

"We think we can help complete projects on time and on budget through access to trades that aren't normally accessed," Coles said.

Coles also said that since 80 per cent of Saskatchewan's construction industry is currently non-unionized there's plenty of room for more unionization without pitting union versus union.

"There's a lot of room for us to not bump into each other. We say to our members 'join as many unions as possible,' " he said. "We don't see conflict, we see growth."

The union isn't waiting to try and crack into the construction arena in the province. CEP has already made an application to the Labour Relations Board for certification a group of construction workers working on a project at Belle Plaine, Coles said.

"When we started seeing it (Bill 80) coming down we started getting aggressive in organizing," he said, acknowledging they have no idea how the board will handle their application.

However, Saskatchewan construction workers represented by trade unions expressed concern at hearings last week that changes in Bill 80 will allow construction companies, and not the workers, to choose the union on the job site.

They also said the current system of having workers in construction represented by trade -- versus a wall-to-wall certification by one union of all the workers on a site -- works well, as does current provincewide collective bargaining by trade.

But Coles said the CEP feels wall-to-wall certifications are effective, and contended the union's construction collective agreements match or exceed industry standards.

Meanwhile, unions on both sides of the issue are in agreement in saying the Saskatchewan Party government should have done consultations earlier in the process.

"We submit it would have been more just and democratic for this government to consult with the CEP and all interested unions and stakeholders prior to the drafting of this legislation," Coles told the committee.

The four days of public hearings concluded Wednesday, with the bill expected to be back before the legislature in the fall.

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