

Project won't bridge divide over construction trades bill

BY MURRAY MANDRYK, THE LEADER-POST JULY 8, 2009

If Advanced Education, Employment and Labour Minister Rob Norris and other government members are sincerely worried about how labour laws are "de-skilling" the province's construction trades, perhaps they should have gone on a fact-finding mission.

They would have only had to travel two blocks north.

For those of you who haven't been in the heart of Regina recently to experience first-hand the traffic inconvenience, the historic Albert Street Memorial Bridge over mighty Wascana Creek is undergoing major structural and aesthetic renovations this summer. Included in the City of Regina's tender is the removal of existing asphalt concrete pavement and deteriorated concrete on top of the bridge deck, localized patching and restoration of sidewalks, curbs and gutters and even the architectural restoration of terra cotta signature balustrades in the bridge's concrete railing. It's both heavy construction work and fine masonry work, but you might be surprised to know that it's not being done by a Saskatchewan contractor. And -- at least when it comes to hiring the local masons and bricklayers needed for the finer balustrade work -- the workers are either coming from out-of-province to do it or the balustrades are being shipped back to Ontario to be worked on.

The contract went to Concreate USL Ltd. of Toronto, whose \$5,086,211 bid was chosen from nine bids tendered to the City of Regina last April.

While it's a bit unusual to have one construction company to do all the work without subcontracting, it's not necessarily unprecedented. Nor is it all that surprising that the lowest bid would go to a firm using non-union labour. That's the way it sometimes works. And given that it's our precious tax dollars at work here, it should work that way.

But it might raise a few eyebrows to know that the work is going to an out-of-province company that doesn't pay taxes here and that the company may not be hiring local labour.

In that regard, maybe those Saskatchewan Party politicians who have been arguing for the past month or so why we need Bill 80, The Construction Industry Relations Amendment Act 2009, need to look at what's going on right outside their window. Maybe they should take a harder look at the supposed difficulty of enticing out-of-province contractors or what it means to "build capacity" of skilled workers here.

Interestingly, the first thing that bothers Graeme Aitken -- an executive with the International Union of Bricklayers who testified last month before the legislative committee hearings on Bill 80 -- isn't necessarily the fact that the Albert Street bridge construction is being performed by non-union workers, but the fact that it's being performed by non-Saskatchewan workers.

"We build things. We built the legislature," said Aitken, referring to both the unionized local masons he represents, and also Saskatchewan's non-unionized bricklayers and masons. "The workers in Saskatchewan are going to drive on that bridge every day. They would have a sense of pride in their work."

That Concrete would either bring in workers from Ontario or ship the balustrades back to Ontario to be worked on is both puzzling and troubling, Aitken said, questioning how this "builds capacity" among the province's skilled tradespeople.

And while Aitken readily admits there are issues that need to be addressed like union "abandonment" of construction firms, he sees Bill 80 as making this problem even worse for Saskatchewan workers. "I just don't see it," Aitken said. "It's a step towards 'de-skilling' the province."

Perhaps governing politicians should be asking a few more questions. Doesn't the Albert Street bridge contract show that it's already

relatively easy for out-of-province construction firms to compete here under current labour laws by bringing in out-of-province labour? Will Bill 80 not make such inherent problems even worse?

Maybe our Sask. Party politicians need to take a second look at this. Perhaps they can begin by looking outside their windows.

- Mandryk is the political columnist for the Leader-Post.

© Copyright (c) The Regina Leader-Post