

# Labour conflict keeps heating up

BY ANGELA HALL, THE LEADER-POST    SEPTEMBER 5, 2009

Saskatchewan's construction industry unions plan to host a picnic in the park this weekend, offering a family Labour Day celebration of food, face-painting and inflatable outdoor toys for kids.

But the fun and games of the intended festivities masks a simmering tension on Saskatchewan's labour front that continues to heat up.

Spurred by the concerns over Bill 80, the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council decided to host the event not only for the usual Labour Day purpose of celebrating working people, but also to inform the public about the Saskatchewan Party government's proposed new law the unions say will destabilize the construction industry.

"We still think the government should withdraw Bill 80. We find it seriously flawed and unworkable in its present state," said Terry Parker, business manager for the building trades council.

The proposed legislation would open the door to unions currently not allowed to organize in the province's construction sector, and end the requirement that unionized workers in construction join the union specific to their trade. The government says the changes will afford both businesses and employees more choice.

But Bill 80 is just the latest clash in organized labour's relationship with the Saskatchewan Party government elected in late 2007. Unions have mounted a number of court challenges against the new essential services law, arguing the legislation meant to ensure critical services will continue during a strike is far too broad and strips workers of their rights. Labour has also cried foul over changes to the Trade Union Act.

Advanced Education, Employment and Labour Minister Rob Norris said a "little friction" on the path to reform labour legislation isn't unexpected, noting some contentious aspects of the relationship with organized labour date back to the election. The Canadian Union of Public Employees distributed pamphlets during the campaign warning against the Sask. Party.

"There are certainly elements of that constituency that are, in my opinion, resistant to change, resistant to the growth that's underway within Saskatchewan," said Norris, who added that he doesn't lump all of organized labour into one category. And the outcome of the government's labour agenda has been good public policy, Norris contends.

"The public policy results the people of this province, I think, deserve -- and that is the protection of essential services, the democratic ethos that we see in the amendments to the Trade Union Act, the expansion and reinvigoration of the construction sector with Bill 80," said Norris, who noted even some unions, namely the Communications Energy and Paperworkers, support the proposed construction bill.

"These are tangible results that I think certainly reinforce we're on track, we're serving the interests of the people of the province and we will do our best to work through the complexities of relations with organized labour."

Business has backed the government's changes, and maintains that legislation such as Bill 80 will help workers: "(The unrest) is a short-term issue. It might seem like difficult times for six months or even a year here, but in the long term the interests of the working men and women of Saskatchewan are better served when they have greater choices," said Steve McLellan of the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce.

But NDP Labour critic Andy Iwanchuk said the Sask. Party government has repeatedly failed to consult with labour.

"If you look at this message, it's one of, I would say, complete disrespect and contempt for the working families of this province," Iwanchuk said.

Larry Hubich of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour says relations between organized labour and the province have deteriorated over the past year, pointing to the government's decision to cut funding for the Labour Market Commission, a body on which both business and labour had been represented.