

Labour leaders gather in Regina on holiday to call attention to issues

BY JOE COUTURE, THE LEADER-POST SEPTEMBER 8, 2009



The Saskatchewan Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council (SPBCTC) picnic in Wascana Park on Monday was held to state opposition to Bill 80.

Photograph by: Troy Fleece, Leader-Post

Labour-movement leaders and hundreds of supporters gathered for two separate picnics in Regina to celebrate the Labour Day holiday and to call attention to changes they want to happen.

Barbara Byers of the Canadian Labour Congress spoke at both the Regina and District Labour Council (RDLC) picnic in Candy Cane Park and the Saskatchewan Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council (SPBCTC) picnic in Wascana Park.

"I wanted people to take away a determination to talk to their MPs and their MLAs and even their city councillors about what needs to be done to change the unemployment insurance system," she said, noting desires for improved insurance access and benefits.

"The second major issue is around pensions. We need to improve the Canada Pension Plan so everyone can retire with some feeling of dignity," she said.

Terry Zahorski, RDLC president, said the picnic is for family and community.

"What you do in society and the labour you provide is important," he said. "Be proud to be a worker and be happy we live in a democratic society where we can make the changes necessary to support all workers across the country."

In Wascana Park, SPBCTC business manager Terry Parker noted the event was to state opposition to the provincial government's Bill 80, which he called "an attack on the construction industry."

"It could cause the driving down of wages and benefits in the industry," he said, adding the bill is problematic because it will create "two parallel systems in the construction industry" and has retroactive abandonment provisions.

"We want people to think about all the things unions have provided for members in the past," he said. "We want to see the government withdraw Bill 80."

Larry Hubich, president of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour, also spoke to issues with the province's current Saskatchewan Party government.

"Governments have a responsibility to legislate and regulate in the public interest, not in the interest of corporations and the corporate elite, which is what the Brad Wall government since their election has been doing," he said.

Hubich alleged the government is in violation of international conventions.

Dwain Lingenfelter, leader of the provincial NDP, was one of several high-profile members of his party present for the SPBCTC picnic.

"Many rights are being taken away" from workers in the province of Saskatchewan, he said.

"We believe (in) having the right balance between workers and employers," he said. He pointed to Bill 5 (essential services legislation), Bill 6 (amendments to the trade union act) and Bill 80 as evidence of a shift in that balance in the province, which "will much weaken the economy of Saskatchewan," he said.

In a phone interview on Monday, labour minister Rob Norris noted Bill 5 served to "stand behind essential services" and Bill 6 was "completely consistent with the democratic ethos of Saskatchewan."

Norris said Bill 80 "is a very moderate approach to ensuring there's greater choice and more competition within the construction sector" and "will allow individuals living in Saskatchewan who are currently forced to work outside the province to be able to work" within it.

"There's a lot of fear-mongering around this bill. This bill allows for change but it doesn't legislate change -- I think that's a really important point."

He noted some labour unions are in favour of the bill.

"When you have groups opposed to it and groups that suggest you haven't gone far enough, it usually means you're pretty close to getting it where the people of this province want," Norris said.