

CLAC serves employer interests

BY KELVIN GOEBEL, SPECIAL TO THE STARPHOENIX JANUARY 8, 2010

Following is the viewpoint of the writer, executive secretary-treasurer of the Saskatchewan Regional Council of Carpenters, Drywall, Millwrights and Allied Workers.

In recent months we've heard an increasing amount of rhetoric from the Christian Labour Association of Canada. I remind you that CLAC is an association, not to be counted among the traditional unions.

It holds no affiliation with any other known labour group such as the American Federation of Labour--Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) or the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). Established in Canada in 1952, the CLAC did not gain legal status until 1963.

I think it's a shameful ploy for CLAC to use "Christian" in its name. That lulls us into a sense of complacency and thinking that it surely must have the interests of the worker as its priority. Christ definitely did not align himself with the chambers of commerce, federations of independent businesses or contractors' associations, and abhorred political leaders who had little consideration for the downtrodden.

CLAC recently submitted to the Minimum Wage Review Committee a recommendation that workers under the age of 21 be paid a minimum wage that's 10 per cent less than their co-workers who are older.

I simply cannot fathom this coming from a group that claims to represent workers.

This alone should send everyone a signal as to whose interests CLAC really represents. Working unto the master as to the Lord has taken on yet another meaning.

CLAC also espouse the view that there is some advantage for one group of workers who belong to one union to compete for the same work with others who belong to alternative unions. Again, the rationale escapes me.

I am proud to belong to a craft union that takes an opposing view.

In 1881, our founders knew that the only way workers would ever get a chance to improve their lot was to combine into one national union and later, an international union. They knew that if the strong were able to unite, so too, should the weak.

Until the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America (UBC) was established, carpenters in North America worked under a variety of situations. There could have been several guilds or societies of carpenters in the same city. Carpenters also worked as independent contractors. As CLAC

would suggest, such cutthroat competition is somehow good for the tradesperson.

Our forefathers could see this system wasn't working. The only solution was for workers to band together into one large organization to counter the powerful effects of the purchasers of construction services.

The UBC has a long and proud heritage. Our founder and first general-secretary, Peter McGuire, also was a founder of the American Federation of Labour. He lobbied for legislation that would recognize the strength and dignity of labour, and is known today as the Father of Labour Day.

UBC also was the union chosen by the AFL to take on the struggle to win the "eight hour day." It succeeded where many earlier attempts by other unions were unsuccessful. Carpenters, along with all workers today in North America, have much to be thankful for due to the victories of our leaders.

The current Construction Industry Labour Relations Act (1992) in part recognizes our union as the sole bargaining agent to represent carpenters in the construction industry. The same applies to the rest of the building trade unions, each of which represent workers in their respective trades. In essence, these unions are the professional organization chosen to represent the workers in each construction industry trade.

This concept is similar to other professions represented by their own professional organizations. How can any single organization like CLAC even attempt to lay claim that it will, or is able, to represent the specific needs and interests of workers in up to 14 craft groups?

Saskatchewan workers have enjoyed labour peace and good working conditions in the construction industry largely because of legislation such as the Construction Industry Labour Relations Act (1992). Now CLAC, this employer-accommodating group, with the full support of the Saskatchewan Party, hopes that Saskatchewan citizens are as naive as it thinks we are.

I, for one, am proud of the heritage of my union and know that in unity there is strength. Don't accept the word of snake-oil salesmen.

What is planned to initially apply to us in the construction industry will most surely spill over to any and all workers in any industry, especially in health care. Complacency is not an option.