

by Kevin Libin



## “You talkin’ for me?”

Why are union leaders running election ads on non-labour issues? Why do their members have to pay for them?

The most entertaining thing about the otherwise soporific recent Alberta election campaign was surely the appearance of a series of slick attack ads targeting Progressive Conservative leader Ed Stelmach. Accompanied by unflattering close-ups of the premier’s face and a visual collage of negative headlines, a forbidding voice-over accused Stelmach of ruining health care, economic bungling and numerous crimes against the province.

The ads were sponsored by an unknown group: “Albertans for Change.” Had any Ontarians watched one of the group’s ads, it might have reminded them of similar campaigns that ran in the past two elections in that province from the equally mysterious “Working Families Coalition,” targeting PC leaders Ernie Eves and, later, John Tory.

The ads didn’t say so, but in both cases, the messages were funded by unionized employees. Yet, the Alberta campaign, about hospital waiting lists, homelessness and energy prices, had nothing to say about labour issues. That’s because the union elites behind Albertans for Change — and, likewise, Working Families — aren’t interested in advancing the political views of unionized workers. They don’t even seem to care about advocating policies that actually benefit workers. What’s more, workers who object to such use of their dues can’t do anything about it.

In case you haven’t noticed, plenty of blue-collar workers in Alberta and Ontario actually support conservative parties. Your typical welder in the oilsands or southern Ontario autoworker, pulling down \$80,000 or more a year, has an upper-middle-class interest in keeping the economy strong and taxes low. Check the provincial voting records in Fort McMurray and Oshawa. These are Tory towns.

If these workers lived in the U.S., Australia, New Zealand or the 47 Council of Europe states, they would have the law on their side. In all those jurisdictions, compelling individuals to join a group and support its political agenda has been outlawed by legislators or the courts, on grounds that it violates the right to freedom of association. In some Canadian workplaces, union membership is mandatory, or non-members are required to pay full dues — Europeans

working in unionized shops must sometimes fund expenses related to contract talks, but can’t be made to pay for other union projects. That makes Canada the only major Western country where someone can be forced to pay for unions to air political messages he or she doesn’t like.

These rules do more than deny rights: They cost us all a bundle. When union bosses can command money from workers for things other than contracts, they end up doing things that serve their own interests, not workers’. After Working Families helped topple Ontario’s PCs in 2003, the Liberal government delivered laws banning secret ballot certification votes in some workplaces and empowered the labour board to unilaterally impose unionization on others — making it easier for labour leaders to increase rolls without having to earn the workers’ support.

Alberta’s union heads wanted a Liberal government because that party had promised, among other things, a replacement worker ban. That would make impossible a repeat of what happened during the 2005 Telus strike, when members of Alberta’s Telecommunications Workers Union decided it was their leaders, not management, that were being unreasonable. Three thousand workers crossed the picket line, pressuring union bosses to settle.

That’s what workers wanted. But their unaccountable union chiefs felt otherwise. Those diverging interests not only breed discontent in the ranks, they likely help explain why Canada loses more productivity to labour disruptions than any industrialized peer. Between 2001 and 2005, Canada lost the equivalent of 14 million workdays to strikes or lockouts. That’s 202 days lost per 1,000 employees. The E.U. average, by comparison, was 53 days. While unionization rates there may be higher, E.U. labour leaders know their existence hinges on serving members’ interests. Here, with a captive membership and guaranteed funds, union bosses are more interested in other pursuits, like stirring up trouble in political campaigns, and on the job. **B**

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