

Stelmach target of union attack ads

But labour bosses, not members, are driving the campaign

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As assuredly as dogs hate vacuum cleaners and kids hate flossing, it is one of the universe's cosmic truths that unions detest conservative governments. And so, even in Alberta, where some hard-working welders take home more than family doctors, nurses can make as much as \$90,000 a year and Ed Stelmach's PC government's pre-election spending binge picked up the multi-billion-dollar tab for an unfunded teachers' pension liability, the province's labour movement has unleashed a ferocious campaign dedicated to felling the ruling Tories.

In a place arguably better for workers' living standards than anywhere west of Paris, it's tough for labour to find much to complain about. Probably that's why ads sponsored by "Albertans for Change," the front group for the Alberta Building Trades Council and the Alberta Federation of Labour, don't actually mention labour issues, focusing instead on questions about Mr. Stelmach's leadership abilities, health care wait times and the contention that Albertans "pay more than we should for natural gas, electricity and gasoline."

Union leaders won't disclose the attack ads' cost, but their prime-time TV spots, including during the Super Bowl, and full-page newspaper ads put estimates north of \$1 million.

On Saturday, the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees said it would pitch in, donating \$300,000 to "Phase II" of "Albertans for Change."

Yesterday, the AFL launched a second campaign, "Show Us the Plan," direct mailing 130,000 homes with accusations that the Tories lack direction on oilpatch development and the environment.

But some union workers are more ticked with union bosses than the Tories.

"Stelmach is no enemy of labour," says one frustrated Edmonton journeyman, sufficiently worried that publicly supporting the PCs would lead to trouble in his union that he asked for anonymity. "Everybody's working here. Everybody's doing well."

There isn't a single project in Fort McMurray not filled with card-carrying members. Yet, Tory MLA Guy Boutilier has been winning elections in that riding since 1997. The Tory candidate in West Yellowhead, Robin Campbell, runs the coal miners' union local in his area. The PCs may be the more business-friendly party, Mr. Campbell says. But that's what unions should want.

"If business can't make money, there's no jobs. And if there's no jobs, there's no union."

Among Alberta's 200,000 unionized workers, there are surely others of similar mind. Still, members are powerless to stop union associations spending their dues assailing the Tories, even on issues that have roughly zero to do with the workplace.

"If they had come out with ads saying 'change the labour legislation,' I'd have a better understanding about why they're making it an election issue," says Stephen Kushner, president of Merit Contractors Association, a construction employers group. "There's no reference to labour legislation anywhere □ They're taking on issues the pollsters probably believe are the [Tories'] soft spots."

The campaign bears an unmistakable resemblance to the 2003, multi-million-dollar assault on Ontario's Progressive Conservatives, by a group that suddenly appeared at election time, calling itself the "Working Families" coalition. The "Not this time, Ernie" ads, blasting health care, education and highway tolls, sank Tory popularity in a province where auto-worker towns like Oshawa and Ajax had been voting blue.

The "Working Families" were, in fact, union leaders. And within two years of taking power, the victorious Liberals introduced laws that undid much of the Conservatives' labour law reforms, including reinstating first contract certification (requiring managers submit to binding arbitration when negotiating with a union the first time), re-activating the power of the labour board to impose unions on a workplace, and doing away with secret ballot certification votes on construction sites.

The measures didn't bring much direct benefit to the average Joe or Joanne in a hardhat. But they make it easier for union executives to expand their base, says John Mortimer, president of LabourWatch, an employee-rights association.

"I don't think union leaders are as interested in influencing how their rank-and-file votes as they are in getting legislation that will give them more coercive power and make them less accountable," Mr. Mortimer says.

Alberta's Liberals would follow Mr. McGuinty's lead, promising first-contract certification, and bans on replacement workers during strikes. The NDP, Big Labour's oldest friends, have similar plans, but, alas, no hope of winning.

In 2004, trade unions donated nearly three times more to Kevin Taft's Liberals than to the NDP -- probably why NDP leader Gary Mason now wants a ban on union donations.

Clearly, Alberta's labour bosses are throwing their support firmly behind the provincial Liberals, even if the average worker here is just as likely to cast his ballot for Mr. Stelmach's Conservatives.

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