

Anti-union article may help Ekati miners

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It's not surprising that John Mortimer of LabourWatch would jump to criticize the Public Service Alliance of Canada for its efforts to win a fair first contract for striking workers at the Ekati diamond mine in the Northwest Territories. (Rough Diamonds, June 21.)

After all, LabourWatch is an employer-funded organization that exists to discourage unionization. Check its Web site to see how it also openly promotes union decertification

LabourWatch's members include the National Citizens Coalition, a well-known anti-union organization; the Business Council of B.C., representing major employers; the Canadian Restaurant and Foodservices Association, an employer group in a mostly non-union sector, and the BC Technology Industries Association, another employer with few unionized workers.

But what is surprising is that Mortimer and LabourWatch may have been very helpful to PSAC in achieving the tentative collective agreement with mine owner BHP Billiton that Ekati workers are currently voting on.

That's because articles like his, even though it was negative toward PSAC, still help spread the word about our dispute and the issues involved.

And one of the only ways a small group of 375 workers has to influence a giant company like BHP Billiton, with profits worldwide last year of \$7.5-billion and 37,000 employees in 25 countries, is through public awareness and pressure.

That's why they joined PSAC, a union of 160,000 members from coast to coast to coast, which has given them the financial support and resources needed to even the odds when taking on such a powerful company.

Since Ekati workers set up picket lines on April 7, it was clear to PSAC that a traditional strike would not be sufficient to win a first contract.

That's why we began a corporate campaign, including the highly successful "Dirty Diamonds" advertising and leafleting that Mortimer describes, albeit in unflattering terms.

What's clear is that labour disputes will increasingly take on a public and international approach and focus, not just on the picket line but the bottom line of companies in disputes with unions.

Since the Ekati strike began, PSAC has contacted unions around the world where BHP Billiton operates, informed international media about the dispute, raised our concerns with investors in BHP Billiton and leafleted outside Canadian jewellers who sell Aurias and CanadaMark diamonds produced at Ekati, asking consumers to boycott them.

And as Mortimer notes, we also ran "Dirty Diamonds" ads in The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal this month to reach more than two million readers.

Two points LabourWatch made need correction. Mortimer says calling Ekati diamonds "conflict" diamonds was untruthful. But our ad was very clear -- we spoke of a labour conflict, not a war, and made clear what our strike was about.

PSAC strongly supports the work of the United Nations in ending the trade in conflict or blood diamonds, primarily from Africa. But we have every right to tell consumers about a labour conflict here at home.

Secondly, Mortimer is fixated on the issue of unions having the right to penalize members who cross their own picket lines. It's regrettable that some workers, facing financial and employer pressure, cross picket lines.

In this case, a Canada Industrial Relations Board order and the Canada Labour Code ensure that neither the employer nor the union do anything that discriminates against workers for their actions during the dispute.

But the real penalty any worker who crosses a picket line faces is not a union fine -- it is the loss of self-respect that comes from failing to support fellow workers fighting for fairness.

And the best solution is for Ottawa to pass legislation like that in B.C. and Quebec which bans the use of replacement workers in labour disputes

We hope the tentative agreement with BHP Billiton will allow us to work with, rather than against, the company. That's in everyone's interests.

But every employer should know that PSAC and other unions are ready and able to fight multinational corporations at home and abroad with new tactics if we cannot reach a fair deal for workers at the bargaining table.

Todd Parsons is president of the Union of Northern Workers component of PSAC, which represents Ekati diamond mine workers.

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