

The StarPhoenix

Labour legislation changes supported by most residents

Jim Radiff, Special to The StarPhoenix

Published: Thursday, May 08, 2008

Following is the viewpoint of the writer, chair of the Merit Contractors Association of Saskatchewan.

The minority that opposes change in Saskatchewan labour laws has dominated the news for weeks, but it's now clear it doesn't dominate public opinion.

A recent survey in the Regina Leader-Post shows wide support for the main changes being proposed, even among union households. And the public is right. The proposed amendments really are not controversial at all.

One of the amendments sets up a mechanism to sustain vital services if there is a strike. The other calls for simple democratic principles. Far from giving Saskatchewan the worst labour laws in Canada, they merely bring us into line with other provinces, including NDP-governed Manitoba.

The essential services law is villified, allegedly for taking away the right to bargain. But in fact, it actually requires bargaining between union and management, ahead of a strike, to settle the core services to be delivered if a strike develops.

It's about negotiating in good faith -- precisely the sort of thing unions expect of management. Is it unreasonable to ask the same of the union?

Opponents say the law casts too wide a net. But how unreasonable is it to preserve services that affect life, health and damage to property? In some provinces, whole sectors are prohibited from striking. The Saskatchewan law is much more tightly focused.

No right is being lost. But all rights do have limits. Everyone understands speed limits and libel laws. It cannot be much of a reach to understand essential public services laws.

An open-ended opportunity to close down all of a critical public service is just too much. It's not only management that is penalized. Even the threat of losing certain services can cause undeserved grief for people, who have no say at the bargaining table and no other options to get what they need.

Similarly, why would anyone say it's unreasonable to have a secret ballot on a vote to certify or decertify a union, or to allow both sides to voice their opinions, or to negotiate how long a collective agreement will apply?

These ideas are ordinary common sense. A better question is why we haven't had them all along.

Those who oppose change say unions will be weakened. A broader view is that the rights of all citizens will be recognized. Union members are citizens, too. Many of them are among the majority who have no trouble with the proposed changes.

This province enjoys a strong pull-together tradition. In front of us lies historic opportunity that can benefit everyone. It will be unfortunate for Saskatchewan if adjustments as practical as the labour law changes are made into excuses for feuding and bitterness.

The changes simply do not warrant this interpretation. Our common life as a province deserves better.