

## PREPARING FOR A RETURN TO THE LEGISLATURE

BY MURRAY MANDRYK

Listening to a bunch of politicians debate Saskatchewan's labour laws isn't exactly how most kids would prefer to spend their free time.

Really, it isn't the way old political columnists like myself would necessarily prefer to spend our free time, either.

But what if the result of this debate meant that you will get less money deducted from your first pay cheque because young people were exempt from paying union dues? Conversely, what if it meant your first pay cheque - or maybe even your parents' pay cheques - wound up being smaller because unions won't be as effective in their negotiations if they don't have as much money from union dues?

This will be one of the issues that will be debated in the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly this fall when the province's MLAs return on October 24<sup>th</sup> for the second session of the 27<sup>th</sup> legislature.

Of course, any time politicians with strongly-held and opposing views get together, there is bound to be chatter that ranges from good-natured teasing to downright nastiness. In that sense, the Saskatchewan legislature is a bit like a well-marbled school yard. And like any school yard, the occupants often need more than a little policing.

However, what shouldn't be lost in the sometimes-bad behavior is that what happens here is important and very much affects every one of us. Potential changes to our labour laws are one example.

During Saskatchewan's legislative spring sitting, the Saskatchewan Party government proposed a public review of all of the province's labour laws, with the stated goal of making them easier to use for employers and employees alike.

One of the more controversial aspects of this labour law review is the idea of exempting certain individuals - including those that under 18 years and working part-time to save money to pay for their education - from having to pay union dues.

This is an idea that was very much supported by many businesses and even some members of unions that feel they aren't getting good value for the dues that they pay.

However, members of the New Democratic Party Official Opposition and many union executives completely disagree for several reasons.

Such opponents to this contemplated change point to the Supreme Court of Canada that ruled 65 years ago that everyone who enjoys the benefit of a service should have to pay equally for that service. Since the benefit of paying union dues is representation at the bargaining table that usually produces higher wages and better working conditions for employees, the NDP and union executives argue that even students benefit from the dues and should have to pay them.

Moreover, union leaders and NDP politicians say they believe that the Saskatchewan Party government is interested in extending the exemption to union members other than students. This would go against the fundamental principle of solidarity and would weaken unions, they argue.

There are many, many such issues emerging from the labour law review that will be debated this fall at the Saskatchewan legislature, but it won't be the only issue.

For example, prior to the session starting, Premier Brad Wall was scheduled to release his long-term economic vision for the province. One of the likely issues that will emerge out of this paper is the direction of post-secondary training - both university and trade school training.

For many current students, what emerges out of this paper will have an immediate impact on what their life will be like after high school. It could very well determine how much future tuition will cost or what training opportunities will be readily available.

One interesting thing about such issues is that there is often less disagreement between the two sides of the legislature than some might think. Both have the future of the province at heart ... even if they have different ideas as to how to achieve it.

Finally, there will be some issues in this session where there may not be any disagreement at all. One of those issues is the 100<sup>th</sup> year celebration of the building of the legislature.

However, what's always more important than the building itself is what goes on inside the legislature. That is something that impacts everyone.

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