

Language key in labour policy

Saskatoon StarPhoenix, February 28, 2013, A9.

BY LOLEEN BERDAHL AND DAVID MCGRANE

Berdahl is an associate professor of political studies at the University of Saskatchewan. McGrane is an assistant professor of political studies at St. Thomas More College. Their analyses will be presented at the "Reflections on Reform: The Future of Saskatchewan Labour Legislation" workshop at the U of S on Saturday.

Since the days of Tommy Douglas and Ross Thatcher, Saskatchewan politics has often resembled a battle royale between the business community and unions, with the public watching in the stands.

Today, the political landscape for Saskatchewan's businesses and organized labour unions is in flux.

Unionization rates have been plateaued and unionized workers are becoming increasingly concentrated in the public sector.

At the same time, the Saskatchewan Party government has introduced changes to labour policies that businesses claim increase economic competitiveness but that the labour movement claims limit their right to strike and their ability to form new unions. The public is again left out of the debate.

As part of the 2011 Saskatchewan Election Study, collected by the University of Saskatchewan's social sciences research laboratories, we asked the public what they thought about unions and labour policy. We were surprised to find that the feelings of the public toward unions and labour policy in Saskatchewan are by no means black or white.

In so far as people perceive unions as narrowly defending the interests of their own members, the public reaction is negative. Indeed, almost three in five (58.1 per cent) respondents feel that unions generally ask for too much. However, the public is more positive regarding the broader role of unions, and a strong majority (64.8 per cent) feels that unions play an important role in promoting better working conditions and wages.

Two factors are particularly important (albeit not surprising) determinants of attitudes toward unions: union members are more supportive of unions than are non-union members, and self-reported NDP voters are more supportive than other residents.

As for labour policy, the public has a generally favourable attitude toward the Public Essential Services Act (Bill 5), which placed limits on public sector strikes. The plurality of respondents (45.2 per cent) favours the essential services legislation, while almost one-third of respondents (31.3 per cent) oppose the legislation and one-fifth (20.2 per cent) has no position on this issue.

Interestingly, being in a union does not predict opposition to the essential services law. Instead, working in the public sector, regardless of whether one is unionized, voting for the NDP and having positive feelings toward unions are the most important factors for those who oppose essential services regulations.

What are the implications of these findings for business and labour as they continue to battle for the hearts and minds of Saskatchewan people?

Unions will not find a sympathetic public if they are perceived only to be fighting for more money for their members. To garner public support, the union movement needs to frame its communication around its struggles to improve the lives of all workers, and how they aid the most vulnerable in Saskatchewan.

In fact, those who aren't in the workforce (full-time caregivers, students, retirees and the unemployed) are some of the biggest supporters of unions.

That could be because they feel that unions are fighting for an adequate social safety net that will aid those who are most economically insecure in our society.

On the other side, businesses and governments that negotiate with unions should focus their public relations campaigns on offering a fair settlement, and how labour is simply asking for too much. The more unions are framed as being self-interested and a "special interest group," the more unsympathetic the public may be to their cause.

In terms of partisan politics, labour's support for the NDP is seen as logical and as producing returns outside of favourable legislation once the party ascends to power. Indeed, since NDP voting is correlated with favourable feelings toward unions, it appears that unions' encouragement of more people to vote NDP helps to create a friendlier public opinion environment for labour.

The inverse is that insofar as it aims to create a public opinion less favourable to unions, the business community acts very reasonably when it supports non-NDP parties during elections.

Finally, it is notable that union membership is not a significant predictor of opposition to essential services legislation. The strategic implication for public sector unions is that they cannot necessarily rely on private sector workers or private sector unions to oppose legislation that has a negative effect on public sector workplaces.

The conflict between labour and business that has characterized Saskatchewan politics over the past 70 years undoubtedly will continue. If gaining favour with public is an important part of this battle, both sides must realize that the language they use and how they frame the issues can be decisive.