

Mediation adds up to hope

BY MURRAY MANDRYK, THE LEADER-POST JULY 8, 2011

A potentially nasty and divisive teachers' labour dispute has most likely been averted by a thoughtful and productive mediator's report.

If the fruition of mediator Richard Hornung's report is a ratified teachers' contract this fall, credit goes to both the Saskatchewan Party government and teachers for bargaining firmly, but fairly. But if strained labour relations in this province do improve, even bigger thanks go to Hornung for demonstrating how government/labour relations should work.

Prior to Hornung's report Wednesday, it seemed Premier Brad Wall's government and labour were doing their utmost to show how this relationship should not work.

The fifth and sixth bills of the newly elected Sask. Party government introduced essential services legislation and changes to the Trade Union Act that made it significantly more difficult to organize workplaces - laws labour viewed as a declaration of war.

The nurses then lobbied the government directly to secure an eye-popping 35-per-cent-plus settlement, creating not only unrealistic expectations for every other public sector union, but also the notion that the bargaining table was a rather irrelevant place to be under this government.

The Sask. Party government further fortified that latter notion by: obstreperously refusing to move off its undeclared 5.5-per-cent, three-year wage mandate, causing contract negotiations to drag on for a frustrating two years; simply using the powers of the essential services bill to prevent the vast majority of specific bargaining unions from mounting effective job action, and; using threats like layoffs (the key factor in the settlement with the main body of the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees Union), removal of earned-days-off (a predominate factor in the settlement with SaskTel's CEP) or back-to-work legislation (the single thing that forced the SGEU's crop insurance adjusters back to work) to force the unions to sign unwanted agreements.

Of course, Saskatchewan's unions contributed mightily to their own problems, too. Angry huffing and puffing from their leadership or unproductive confrontations with former labour minister Rob Norris, or even Wall himself, seemed only to strengthen the Sask. Party government's resolve. Even more unhelpful was the occasional union insensitivity (see: SGEU President Bob Bymoan's comment that a major flood was a good time for crop adjusters to strike) or expression of entitlement that those that work for government somehow deserve a bigger share of the province's good fortune than anyone else.

Perhaps most unhelpful, however, were the decisions by some union leaderships to become even more closely aligned with the NDP, either through direct political contributions to the party or ads like the ones that SGEU and CUPE are now running that amount to thinly veiled NDP policy propaganda.

This has only served to fuel the Sask. Party's self-serving rhetoric that today's labour unrest must solely be the result of a union-NDP conspiracy to unseat the Sask. Party this fall, rather than its own inconsistent, bizarre and often antagonistic approach to contract negotiations.

It's also for this reason that mediator Richard Hornung's report on the teachers' dispute has been such a refreshing breath of fresh air. From his initial salutation that complimented both sides on the good faith they exhibited in reaching a settlement through the well-researched and well-reasoned suggestions for compromise, Hornung effectively cut through much of the nonsense surrounding wage comparisons and addressed the critical problems of starting teachers' wages and the length of time it takes them to reach maximum salary.

What has resulted is a solid basis for a contract - one providing an 8.8-per-cent increase over three years that could be as high as 10.5 per cent for new teachers. Also, teachers can now reach maximum salary at 11 years rather than 15 years. It's certainly moved the government off its initial 5.5-per-cent "firm" offer. But it's a far cry from the teachers' initial lunacy of 12 per cent for the first year or 16.3 per cent over three years.

Most importantly, what we got from Hornung is the recognition that there's got to be common ground where the two sides can professionally and amicably settle their differences. Let's hope both the Wall government and the unions are smart enough to build something on that common ground.

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