

Focus on need, not greed

'Change is sometimes hard to accept for some' is the first thought that came to mind when I read "It's the economy" in the opinion section of the November 2, 2011 edition of the Chronicle Herald.

This article was submitted by an "employer coalition" of 18 associations from across Nova Scotia in which they raise many interesting areas of concern, but the principle focus being on an issue that is currently before the Labour Management Review Committee (LMRC) – first contract arbitration (FCA).

In addition to clearly noting that not only are they opposed to FCA; they are also opposed to the formation of the LMRC and the process around it, which I believe to be very unfortunate and short-sighted.

The LMRC was created last fall with the passage of Bill 100 with the intent to form a stakeholder body and process to review legislative and related matters with the goal of enhancing relationships between workers and employers and to improve the overall labour relations and reputation of the province.

We believe we have a unique opportunity before us in the province to deal with issues or matters important to the stakeholders and that opportunity is the LMRC; and although it may be viewed as not being perfect, it is a far cry from the process and consultation opportunities we have had in the past.

In the past, stakeholders or at least those who represent workers, were left totally out of the process until legislation was introduced, being told 'that's what law amendments is for'. Bill 100 corrected this by establishing the LMRC and review process.

If there are problems with the process and/or structure, the focus should be on the faults rather than trashing an otherwise progressive stakeholder review structure and process. Let's make it stronger rather than tear it down.

I won't go into the merits or pros and cons of the proposed FCA as it is a matter currently before the LMRC and we are awaiting the results of consultations on a discussion paper which will be added to the feed-back from a study day on this matter that was attended by union and non-union employers and Labour representatives.

I will, however, dispute the view or challenge that there is no need to discuss this matter as part of the overall goal of building and improving Labour Relations in the province; an open mind will clearly see we do have a record and history of difficult and protracted first contract negotiations, some of which have resulted in strikes.

Some of these strikes achieved national notoriety, while others resonated throughout the province. All of these incidents of excessively long bargaining sessions and strikes

have left a bitter taste in the mouths of the affected stakeholders, sometimes taking years to build the trust that had been so undermined or destroyed.

But if you do not represent an organized workplace or workers; you likely have no concept of how devastating of an impact this can have on workplace relations.

Yes, I am one of those who believe progressive thinkers are wise to review, discuss and possibly improve on such matters, before we are actually confronted with a situation; where we run around asking how do we resolve this dispute; sometimes even seeking government intervention – knowing the potential of what may befall us; the wise person builds a dyke before the flood.

This is not the first or the last we will hear the cries that the sky is falling when an issue arises that may benefit workers and their families; it was almost the identical cry from almost the same organizations when many years ago we first talked about including worker's rights in Occupational Health and Safety legislation.

It's been approximately twenty-five years since workers have had the Right to Refuse unsafe work and despite the hysteria of the day; the sky never fell and the Right to Refuse has not been abused, but our workplaces are getting safer and workplace relations have improved on this matter across the province; yes more to do, but gains are being made.

Closing on their theme - 'Let's keep our focus, it's the economy' - we would like to add to the list of matters that need to be addressed to make a difference in our economy and for people - we have some of the oldest and weakest Labour standards in the country; we have among if not the lowest number of Stat Holidays; we have growing numbers of working poor due to unprecedented exploitation of precarious forms of employment (part-time, casual and contract workers) and a constant struggle to achieve the Minimum wage as a living wage. These workers spend in our local economies; suppressing their abilities to earn and provide for family suppresses our economies as well and contributes to our youth going down the road.

Let's work together to address the matters important to Nova Scotia, Nova Scotians and our future with a focus on need and not greed; building opportunities for all to live, work and prosper in our wonderful province.