



FAST FACTS



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Is Labour's Future in the Streets?

Organized labour in Manitoba (and elsewhere in Canada) has fallen on hard times of late, and the situation might well continue to deteriorate unless the labour movement finds ways to counter the relentless drive of employers to marginalize it.

Part of the answer almost certainly lies in the need to organize workers in the service sector, where unionization rates have traditionally been low. In recent months, the UFCW has twice lost bids to obtain certification for a Wal-Mart store in Thompson, a town dominated by a unionized workforce. Nonetheless, this was a spirited effort against one of the most stridently anti-union employers in the world.

A proposal to establish a project labour agreement for a major upgrade of the Red River Floodway which would have required construction workers to become union members while employed on the project encountered fierce opposition from business interests (construction associations from every sector and every part of the province, the Merit Contractors Association of Manitoba, Chambers of Commerce) and the Conservative party. Opponents of the proposal expressed particular concern about the government trampling on the rights of workers who did not wish to join unions. The government responded by appointing Wally

Fox-Decent to find a solution that would make everyone happy. Fox-Decent recommended that the floodway construction site be declared an organization-free zone, but nonunion members be required to pay a fee for services equivalent to union dues into a trust fund. Despite its neoliberal thrust and logical contradictions, Premier Doer accepted Fox-Decent's solution.

At the March 2004 Manitoba NDP convention, a huge majority of delegates endorsed resolutions supporting anti-scab legislation and calling for the Labour Board to have the power to approve automatic certification in situations where 50% plus one of members in a bargaining unit signed union cards. These proposals were not new; they have been party policy for many years. Nor was there anything new about Premier Doer's response to these resolutions. On the contrary, when he was asked by *Winnipeg Free Press* reporters for his reaction, he declared that he was opposed to anti-scab legislation and saw no need to reduce the threshold for automatic certification from 65% to 50% plus one.

Every year since the NDP regained office in 1999, delegates to conventions have called on the government to: (i) extend coverage of employment standards, health and safety and workers' compensation legislation to paid workers in the agricultural sector (intensive livestock op-

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erations, large grain operations, and the like); and (ii) conduct public hearings on employment standards in general as a prelude to major reforms that would improve standards for all workers and extend rights to part-time, casual and term workers. At the 2003 convention, then-Minister of Labour Becky Barrett announced that reform of labour standards would be a priority of the NDP in a second term. The NDP was elected to a second term in June.

Following the election, Premier Doer, who apparently directly controls what happens in the Labour portfolio, also indicated that employment standards would indeed be a top priority of his government in the second term. Then on March 30, 2004, the nominal Minister of Labour was in Brandon to discuss labour issues with the table officers and delegates of the Brandon and District Labour Council. When she was asked about Employment Standards legislation, she replied "Employment Standards? Oh, we won't be dealing with that until the third term."

Intensifying Opposition

The long and short of it is that the Labour movement in Manitoba is running into intensifying opposition from employers not only in organizing drives but also in collective bargaining and before the Labour Board. At the same time, the Labour movement has discovered that, contrary to expectations, Doer-led NDP governments are not especially labour-friendly (a result perhaps of the fact that Doer seems to have modelled himself on Tony Blair in Britain, a man who has a hard time containing his contempt for the people and organizations who built the Labour Party).

Where does the Manitoba Federation of Labour (MFL) fit in all this? Historically, the pattern in Manitoba has been for the MFL to try and mobilize member unions and rank-and-file members to oppose the regressive programs and policies of Conservative governments. Then, when the NDP forms the government, as it did from 1969 to 1977, 1981 to 1987 and 1999 to the present, efforts to mobilize stop and relations between the Labour movement and the government are moved inside, with meetings between the MFL executive and government through a labour-liaison committee and meetings with the NDP caucus and cabinet ministers.

The governments of Ed Schreyer and Howard Pawley did make improvements to legislation and programs that mattered to labour and working people in general, although even with their governments there was a big divergence between what Labour wanted and what Labour got.

Under the first, and now the second Doer government there have been some modest reforms. Firefighter eligibility for workers' compensation benefits has been extended

to include some of the cancers to which firefighters are more susceptible, and there improvements are in the works for pension and worker's compensation legislation. But the divergence between what workers need and what the NDP delivers has widened.

In such a situation, the question becomes, how long do you keep doing what you're doing when it doesn't seem to be working very well? And, what might the alternatives be?

It would seem that the Labour movement might attempt to exploit growing discontent amongst the rank and file to try and mobilize the rank and file to put the pressure on the Doer government to respond to the needs of workers with progressive legislation and programs. This sort of strategy could result in some benefits to workers during the Doer government's second term of office. More importantly, mobilizing workers for extra-parliamentary action against this government would prepare the labour movement to take on the next Conservative government, with which the "inside" strategy will of course be impossible. In other eras, when faced with a hostile government it was possible to call on workers to defend the gains that had been made in the past. Yet unless the labour movement changes strategy soon, such a call will carry little weight with the mass of workers in this province.

—Errol Black and Jim Silver

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