

Government interference & collective bargaining: An Albertan perspective

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Government interference in the bargaining process is an attempt to undermine a union's ability to effectively engage in its federally protected rights. A recent example of this in Alberta is when the Government of Alberta passed Bill 32 in 2020, the “Restoring Balance in Alberta’s Workplaces Act”.

This flawed piece of legislation makes it more challenging for unions to work effectively, through means such as requiring members to opt in for unions to spend their union dues on “political activities and other causes”. (Alberta Federation of Labour, 2020). Further, Bill 32 also impacts a union's ability to effectively picket through an addition to the labour code that identified obstructing a person trying to cross a picket line as a harmful act. With the Alberta government actively making it more challenging for unions to effectively utilize their collective power, it undermines their ability to bargain in good faith as the employer.

Government interference impacts the integrity of the collective bargaining process. Specifically in public-sector bargaining, the government has a vested interest in reducing their spending on wages and benefits as much as possible. Therefore, the Alberta government introducing anti-union legislation casts doubt on their ability to engage in good faith bargaining. When the Alberta government is actively disrespecting the unions’ right to a fair and good process, it erodes trust in their ability to come to the table as an employer and work collaboratively towards a fair deal.

Furthermore, government interference in the collective bargaining process politicizes the discussion of workers rights. Disagreeing with the government’s decision to roll back workers rights suddenly impacts an individual's political beliefs, and may

cause internal difficulties such as cognitive dissonance. With an increasingly separated political climate, the politicization of bargaining can impact the union's ability to effectively advocate for workers rights and conditions. For example, a reduction in public support for a union may cause increasing pressure on the union to settle for an agreement that does not match what their workers need (Foster et al., 2024).

In order to address these concerns, unions should focus on utilizing their collective power effectively. This could take shape through a public campaign, demonstrating the effects government overstep has on workers abilities to do their jobs. The impact of this can be amplified by having multiple unions collaborate on the same campaign. Additionally, depending on the type and severity of government interference, unions can also undertake actions such as presenting a legal challenge. The freedom to engage in collective bargaining is legally enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (*Canadian Charter*, 1982, s 6(2)(b)), and interference against this ability (i.e., freedom to strike) could warrant a legal challenge against the employer.

Government interference is challenging to navigate due to the breadth and depth of the government's ability to negatively impact the collective bargaining process. Unions such as NASA should work effectively with other public sector unions across the province of Alberta to maximize their joint power and stand up to government interference.

References

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