

October 6, 2008

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WEEKLY POLL

FACT: Canada will elect a new government on October 14.

Which party do you plan to vote for in the upcoming federal election?

- Bloc Québécois
- Green
- Liberal
- NDP
- Conservative

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September 15, 2008

Labour

Effectiveness of unions in Canada criticized

RICHARD GILBERT
staff writer

A survey released by Canadian LabourWatch Association found unions are irrelevant and their leaders out of touch, but one union leader believes this view of the results is biased and distorted.

LabourWatch hired Nanos Research to conduct a telephone survey of 1,000 employed Canadians between July 27th and Aug. 6th.

One of the most important findings of the Nanos survey is that 77 per cent of non-unionized working Canadians are not interested in being unionized.

The survey also found that more than 25 per cent of currently unionized respondents said they would prefer not to be unionized, if given the choice.

"These results speak for themselves" said John Mortimer, president of LabourWatch.

"Union leader positions on a range of issues are contributing to this continuing slide in both interest and actual union representation."

A spokesperson for union workers in Alberta has a very different interpretation of the survey commissioned by LabourWatch.

"It (LabourWatch) is a who's who of anti-labour organizations that exists to undermine unions and get them off work sites," said Gil McGowan, president of the Alberta Federation of Labour.

"When you look at this poll, you must consider the source. This is a laughable group that must not be taken seriously."

McGowan said Nanos is a reputable research firm, but it is clear that the questions have been written in such a way as to encourage negative responses to unions.

"Even with this bias approach the survey shows that 75 per cent of the people polled are happy with and support their union," said McGowan. "This is a higher approval rating than any provincial government in Canada and higher than the Harper government. As a labour leader these figures suggest we are on the right track."

In response to the survey's finding that people are not interested in union membership, McGowan argued that the



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restrictive labour laws in Alberta were the main reason more people are not being able to join a union.

"LabourWatch is not the only organization looking at or asking these types of questions," explained McGowan. "Our own internal survey shows that 30-40 per cent of the people who are not currently unionized would join a union if they could."

Another finding of the survey was that 84 per cent of working Albertans disagreed with union leaders using union dues to pay for advertising campaigns opposing political parties. Almost 70 per cent of working Albertans also disagreed with unions contributing to groups advocating causes unrelated to the workplace.

"The results clearly indicate that workers are rejecting the heavy handed tactics and negative rhetoric of union leaders who claim to speak for all working Albertans, said Stephen Kushner, president of Merit Contractors Association. "The recent provincial election in Alberta which saw the Alberta Building Trades Council (ABTC) and the Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) spend millions of dollars on attack ads is a case in point."

In the run up to the Alberta election on March 3, the ABTC and the AFL sponsored a campaign called 'Albertans for Change'. The main aim of this campaign, which began before the election was announced, was to question the leadership abilities of Conservative party leader Ed Stelmach.

Union leaders did not disclose the cost of these so-called attack ads. However, critics of the campaign estimate the cost at \$1 million for prime-time TV spots and full-page newspaper ads.

McGowan said the decision to spend union funds on the election campaign was made after going through a very democratic process. The union leadership consulted the grass roots and was fully accountable to members.

Despite this fact, McGowan is concerned about the direction the Conservatives are taking public policy on union dues and political campaigns.

"They (Conservatives) will probably get their wish on this one," said McGowan. "The will issue legislation this fall to reduce the unions ability to spend money during an election."

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