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ALBERTA COUNSEL

BILL 32 AND ALBERTA'S UNIONS – WHAT'S NEXT?

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Bill 32, *Restoring Balance in Alberta's Workplaces Act, 2020*, will certainly pass at some point this summer. The Act, long promised by Premier Jason Kenney, seeks to require consent of each union member before using a small portion of their dues on political action.

Conservative politicians have longed to remove union members' ability to influence political processes. This is key to silencing working Albertans in political discourse. Reviewing social media posts from conservatives also reveals a personal animus towards certain labour leaders, such as Alberta Federation of Labour (AFL) President, Gil McGowan. His organization's funding will almost certainly be reduced severely through Bill 32.

The full-throated opposition from labour was inevitable. But for those outside the labour movement, the tactics that may yet come are unknown.

The first step, already underway, is moving public opinion through a paid online media advertising buy. Facebook ads from the AFL, the United Nurses of Alberta (UNA), and others are already popping up. They are casting a very wide net, targeting almost every adult Albertan. Bill 32's attack on freedom of speech and freedom to organize is not easily communicated, so most would see this buy as a necessity.

Other Alberta unions such as the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) or the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) almost always run radio and TV ads, but they tend to have very inoffensive and apolitical scripts. This may change and they may directly take aim at the UCP government.

The second step will come immediately after Bill 32 receives Royal Assent. It will be numerous court challenges. A stay will be sought on implementation almost immediately, and the chances are very real that those efforts will be successful. Charter of Rights challenges and lawsuits will pile on immediately. The legal fights will carry on for years.

The angriest among working Albertans are calling for a general strike. This is a scenario where every unionized worker in a city, region, or province goes on strike simultaneously, regardless of whether their bargaining agreement is expired or not.

Canada does have a history of general strikes. The 1919 Winnipeg General Strike is arguably responsible for spurring numerous reforms we take for granted, like Employment Insurance. The 1972 Quebec General Strike saw an overwhelming charge of 300,000 employees walking off the job in almost every community. These are two of the more successful examples, in terms of outcome and participation.

If a general strike sounds complicated and expensive, it is. It requires a huge amount of political will from an exceptionally large amount of people. This is why it hasn't been seriously attempted since 1983's "Operation Solidarity" strike in British Columbia, which most see as having delivered mixed results.

It would require a lot of unions to agree to a severe measure in an Alberta union community that seldom agrees on much. AUPE has the most members of any union, but they famously refuse to affiliate with any outside group. The Building Trades of Alberta actually issued a release expressing support for portions of Bill 32. Many unions have not had a strike or lockout in a generation.

A general strike is not impossible in Alberta. But it is far from just a simple act of will or courage from labour leaders.

Regional or rotating work actions are both easier to organize and more likely. The protests and lobbying that took place to oppose the Redford government's cuts to employee pensions would be a much smaller-scale sneak preview of what Alberta workers are capable of.

When the Harris government in Ontario lashed out at unionized Ontarians in 1995, the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL) responded with a series of one-day general strikes in cities across the province called "Days of Action". A dozen were held in places like London, Hamilton, and Toronto. Although hundreds of thousands participated, it is debatable if it altered the course of the Harris government. He would subsequently be re-elected in 1999, by a narrower margin.

Albertans could undertake something similar. Tactics could include rotating through municipalities or employment sectors. Some would be easier than others. Obviously, a "Day of Action" in Edmonton would be easier to organize than Taber, for example.

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There is also working towards ensuring the UCP government is not re-elected in the next election, either through supporting other candidates or through a third-party issue campaign. Alberta already bans direct donations to candidates, and Bill 32 would prevent contributions to external organizations to carry it out. But nothing prevents unions from encouraging and training members to campaign for candidates.

Once again, some unions are more open to this than others. The United Food & Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local 401 heavily participates in that kind of political action, whereas public service unions are more reluctant.

Finally, some unions will just go and get the consent that Bill 32 demands. For example, AUPE has long had a "Grey Card" that is circulated to members to sign affirming that the union may represent them. This is not legally necessary for the union, but that signature may very well allow them to use that small portion of dues towards their political action causes.

What is the mostly likely response from Labour to Bill 32? Alberta's labour culture is far more diverse than in other provinces, and consensus is far harder to achieve. Beyond the certain legal challenges, the most likely outcomes are that Albertans will be participating in all of these approaches to a greater or lesser degree.