

Union secrecy first-hand

By Marc Roumy, National Post, National Post - September 15, 2012

Re: "More open than you," Ken Lewenza and Dave Coles, Sept. 7

In their article, union leaders Ken Lewenza and Dave Coles were critical of enhancing union financial accountability through Bill C-377, which troubled me. As a flight attendant for Air Canada, based in Toronto and a member of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), I do not believe my union is as open to its members as they say the CAW and CEP are.

On a quick search of my union's website, there are no financial statements to be found. At our local union meetings, the budget is handed out and numbered and then returned once the meeting has ended. If a member cannot make a meeting, and then wishes to see this statement, they must make an appointment and meet with the secretary-treasurer at the local union office. Since most of my colleagues work just before or after local union business hours, this can be inconvenient to arrange. Yet, as a delegate for a national convention - 2,000 out of a 610,000 strong membership - one does receive an individual budget booklet to take home.

I have attended two national conventions. Even then, after repeated inquiries to union officials, I still do not know the salaries of my national president, secretary-treasurer and vice-presidents. Moreover, to attend a convention, I have to be elected as a delegate, travel across the country (the last national convention was in Vancouver) and then carefully read through the budget booklet to glean the specifics of what my national union does with my dues.

It was a revelation to learn that they fund the election campaigns for NDP candidates, and many other non-union activities within Canada such as the Vancouver Film Festival, and organizations outside of Canada (Burma Project, Honduras Solidarity and a World Water Congress, etc.). At the 2011 national convention, unlike in 2007 and 2009, nothing was put to a debate or vote regarding CUPE National's foreign policy agenda. When I inquired why, I was told that whatever was adopted in 2009 would remain in force.

Surprisingly, Mr. Lewenza and Mr. Coles compared these activities to a privately held business. However, an investor in a business can choose to withdraw their stake and invest elsewhere if they feel their money is being improperly spent. As a union member in Canada we are not given this choice and, even more alarmingly, we are currently denied the option to discuss how our money is used to support non-union activities.

Many would find such a situation intolerable. For many of my colleagues and me, we believe our union would be stronger if we had a truly open and easy access to our union's financial statements. If we have nothing to hide, then we should know what our union leaders earn and where our dues are being spent. If CUPE does not choose to change direction soon, and in the near future we are given the freedom to get hired or associate without obligation to a union, then I fear there may come a day when many of my colleagues will choose to no longer be part of CUPE.

Marc Roumy, Air Canada Component trustee of CUPE, Toronto