

Unions scrambling to sink Tory MP's transparency bill

John Ivison | Sep 11, 2012 6:52 PM ET

A Conservative MP's private members' bill, currently before Parliament, has ushered in a new age of anxiety for Canada's labour movement.

Such is the consternation in union-land that members are being called to mandatory special meetings to come up with some way, any way, to sink Russ Hiebert's Bill C-377. Members of the International Association of Heat and Frost Insulators were informed they would be fined \$50 if they failed to show up for one meeting.

The reason is that Mr. Hiebert's financial transparency bill – which, among other things, would require unions to disclose how much money they spend on political activities – could shatter the union business model forever.

We do not know how much of the \$4.5-billion collected in union dues is spent on political hobby-horses by the leadership, since there is no requirement to disclose that information.

But we can assume that in many cases, those who are forced to donate around two weeks' pay a year to the unions do not agree with the causes chosen.

The genius of Mr. Hiebert's bill is that it amends the Income Tax Act, and so covers all union workers

It is a fair bet that many workers from the Quebec side of the National Capital Region forced to pay dues to the Public Service Alliance of Canada would demand reforms, if it were revealed how much the union spent endorsing the Parti Québécois in the recent provincial election.

It's also a reasonable assumption that many workers in Alberta, forced to pay dues to the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada, would be outraged if they discovered how much of their money was used to host NDP leader Thomas Mulcair's trip west to denounce the oilsands.

Pierre Poilievre, the Conservative MP, was so upset by the PSAC case, he has mulled introducing legislation allowing workers covered by federal labour laws, such as Air Canada staff, to opt out of paying dues if they do not want to be part of the union. Alas, the Rand formula forces all employees within a bargaining unit to pay union dues, even if an estimated 290,000 of them across the country choose not to become members of the union. If Mr. Poilievre brings forth a private members' bill, it would not cover the vast majority of those folks, who are governed by provincial labour laws (though some provincial politicians such as Ontario's PC leader, Tim Hudak, have advocated following the Wisconsin "right to work" model).

Big Labour has been fighting back. [A recent article](#) in the *Financial Post* by Canadian Auto Workers president Ken Lewenza and the CEP's Dave Coles, said Bill C-377 would slap unions with "onerous and discriminatory" accounting regulations. Union members can learn what their money is being spent on by attending union meetings and reading union newsletters, they argued.

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The two leaders claim the bill may not see the light of day because it violates Canadian privacy law, since it would oblige unions to disclose the names and personal information of health benefit recipients.

The good news for those of us who believe unions should be compelled to be accountable to those who pay the piper, is that this provision will likely be amended out at committee, allowing the rest of the bill to proceed untouched.

When Parliament resumes, expect the Conservatives to make a lot of noise about the Hiebert bill. The Prime Minister has already signalled his support by voting for it when it passed second reading.

The Tories argue that the bill would merely bring Canada into line with Australia, France, Germany, the U.S. and U.K. Moreover, they feel many rank and file workers sympathize with their attempts to force union disclosure, backing the NDP into a position where they have to defend the union bosses. With its very existence at stake, it's no surprise the labour aristocracy is being forced to coerce its own members with 50-buck fines to make sure they show up and rally against the Hiebert bill.

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