

Labour laws treat workers like slaves

AS U OF A STUDENTS, WE'RE PRETTY FAMILIAR with staged political protests—our Students' Union puts them on all the time in the name of lower tuition costs. The one that went on at the Legislature on Saturday, however, had more to do with the cost of living than the cost of education.

That afternoon, hundreds of labour-rights activists converged on the Legislature grounds to hold a mock funeral for Alberta's labour code. Demonstrators, including one man dressed as a priest and another as the grim reaper, carried a replica coffin draped in the Canadian flag and placed it on the steps of the Leg.

The spectacle capped off two weeks of demonstrations from trade unions in protest of a recent ruling by the Alberta Labour Relations Board that forbids the carpenters' union from going on strike. They denounced Employment Minister Iris Evans, arguing that the strike restrictions are unconstitutional, based on a recent Supreme Court ruling that made collective bargaining a right.

The labour-law situation has come to a head over the past month. First, roofers, carpenters, and scaffolders walked off the job in protest of a decades-old Alberta law that states that as long as deals have been reached with 75 per cent of the province's construction unions, the government can order the other quarter to step in line. The Alberta Labour Relations Board issued an emergency order, banning the workers from picketing and ordering police to break up any strike action. Now, unionized carpenters—97 per cent of whom were in favour of a strike—are legally prohibited to do so. Protests and walk-outs in support of the carpenters have been going on ever since.

The government's position on this is indefensible, but not surprising. Alberta labour laws are generally viewed as the weakest in the country, and while that's certainly attractive to industry, it's unfair to workers—the very backbone of the boom we're currently enjoying.

As much as the economics of the boom may make us feel that construction workers and other tradespeople are indispensable, they can't really be considered an essential service—the traditional justification for strike-breaking—the way that nurses or teachers can. That takes away the only reasonable basis that the government has to place restrictions on how these workers can negotiate.

Now, some people are claiming that the carpenters should be happy with what they do have—that is, \$31-per-hour wages—and stop being so greedy, but they're missing the point. Not only are those wages not comparable to the industry standard, but they don't look so generous compared to the cost of living in Alberta, especially in places like Fort McMurray.

Moreover, these tradespeople's complaints shed light on the generally huge problem of Alberta's antiquated and unfair labour laws. This is a province where it's legal for employers to hire scabs, for Pete's sake. That sort of law creates not only a hostile environment for negotiation, but means that when strikes do happen, things are much more likely to get ugly and violent.

The right for workers to strike is an important one. They may be tradespeople, but workers don't have many tools at their disposal when it comes to negotiating labour disputes, and if this one is taken away, it puts them at an even greater disadvantage.

Alberta's construction workers have brought the issue of labour-law reform to the forefront, and it's about time. Albertans deserve to have a bigger voice in a conversation that for too long has been dominated by government or industry.

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

Humping the corpses

No one will read this
They're all playing Halo 3
Who's driving the Hog?

CONAL PIERSE
Opinion Editor



KATE KOSTERMAN

LETTERS

Hudema brings no cheer

I was one of the many in attendance at the Shell presentation that was rudely interrupted by the "anti-tar sands" protesters. My purpose in being there—not unlike most of the attending—was to learn about Shell and potential future employment.

When the protesters first burst in, I smiled to myself in appreciation of the university environment—it being a place that caters to individuals who wish to publicly express their opinions. The display was at first entertaining, but quickly devolved into slander and childish attacks on Shell.

Based on the write-up in last week's paper (re: "Former SU prez put on probation," 20 September) it seems that Mike Hudema felt that they were educating [us] about the damage the tar sands are doing. I must say, their message couldn't have been any less clear, and by the end, I was under the impression that they flat out just hated oil.

I distinctly remember hearing "leave the dinosaur bones in the ground" in an obvious reference to fossil fuels, at which point I realized this performance was a fueled opinion, and was merely [operating] under the fallacy that making noise for the sake of making noise is a solution to a problem.

There are many faculties in this university that are dealing with methods, sciences, and research that will hopefully, some day, lead us to viable alternatives to fossil fuels.

Hydrogen and electric energy options are, at this point, the most reasonable choices, but these are still barely economical when utilized as a sole energy source, and take a huge amount of energy to produce, which

barely makes the change justifiable.

Making noise isn't making change, and although it can aid revolution, it still needs to be with tact. Your display wasted everybody's time, and your message is tantamount to what we all already know: fuel is running out; greenhouse gases are bad. Was it really necessary to interrupt a paid-for, private event for that?

DEVIN SAWATZKY
Chemical Engineering IV

Council hopefuls offer gimicks, not answers

While it's gratifying to see the large number of candidates for the upcoming Students' Council by-election, their almost complete lack of vision is worrying.

There are a host of contentious questions before Council: should we pay councillors? What should we do with the Powerplant? With Bear Scat? Should we spend more student money on federal lobbying? On student groups?

This year's crop of candidates has—as far as I can tell from the broken SU elections website and the smattering of poorly-designed posters—been entirely silent when it comes to offering policy answers.

Voters needn't expect every candidate to spell out exactly how they'll vote on every issue; there's room for learning on the job. We do, however, need to get a sense for what principles will guide their decision-making. So far, all I'm hearing are mindless platitudes about "cleaning up Council" and "speaking out for students."

How can a Councillor represent me if I don't know what they stand for?

KEVIN NICOLL
Engineering IV

Cats intelligent enough to be disobedient dicks

Normally I'd never take the time to debate someone else's opinion—seeing as how we're all entitled to one—but after reading, "Cats a worse pet than fish" (20 September), I knew that I couldn't keep quiet on this one.

I'm definitely more of a cat person—although I also own a dog—and while I've put in the time to train my dog, I really don't see how this showcases my dog's personality so much more than my cat's.

Yes, they're hugely different in what commands they'll obey, but did you ever think that maybe it's because cats are smart that they feel no obligation to obey someone barking orders at them? My cat has just as much personality as my dog does—they just show it in different ways.

Maybe before harping on all felines you should consider the fact that your roommate just happened to get a crazy one. After reading what you wrote however, I can't say I blame the cat for torturing you.

Before you label all cat lovers as "lazy," maybe you should take a minute to realize you're labelling an entire species based on one example.

So while you're looking for something to blame for your disrupted sleep, why don't you channel your anger elsewhere and quit harping on cats just because they don't want to lend a paw to your "pimp-game."

JENNY NIKOLIC
Arts III

Smoke less, think more

(Re: "Tis the season to be patriotic," 20 September) Easy on the pot, man; remember, it's not yet legal in Alberta. It gets you criminal possession south of the border as well,

so be warned for your own benefit that "white, square-jawed" men may refuse you entry next time you're crossing into the States to buy some gas or groceries.

You probably spent days mulling over your piece, so while I'm at it, let me direct your attention to some other activities it simply behooves a liberal intellectual to engage in. Keeping with the spirit of your opinion piece, I've handpicked ones that are all pothead-friendly as well as time-consuming. Naked radical cheerleading comes to mind, but why not take it one step further and add the spice of a Vancouver-style naked bicycle ride to the recent fad of political cheerleading?

Should you be into more quiet things, consider translating every issue of the Gateway to Quenya, the language of High Elves. They say all things elvish go well with pot, so you could easily double the impact of liberal propaganda on campus.

I don't want to be presumptuous, but this is no less nonsensical a way to get attention than writing lengthy opinions on topics that are of no personal concern of yours.

DMITRIY VOLINSKIY
Via email

Letters to the editor should be sent to letters@gateway.ualberta.ca (no attachments, please).

The Gateway reserves the right to edit letters for length and clarity, and to refuse publication of any letter it deems racist, sexist, libellous or otherwise hateful in nature. The Gateway also reserves the right to publish letters online.

Letters to the editor should be no longer than 350 words, and should include the author's name, program, year of study and student ID number to be considered for publication.