

# Overhaul of Alberta labour laws greeted by cheers and jeers

## Chamber says bill covering parental leave, disabled pay and unions has been rushed

**BILL KAUFMANN**

Proposed changes to Alberta labour laws easing parental leave are long overdue, Calgary workers' advocates said Tuesday.

But a Calgary Chamber of Commerce official expressed frustration and concern over the process and some elements of Bill 17.

"Ontario took two years on their labour bill while we've had a 36-day consultation period," said Zoe Addington, the chamber's director of policy and government relations.

Even so, a roundtable discussion on Tuesday with Labour Minister Christina Gray heard that the spectre of employer abuse is being lifted with the bill.

"I'm absolutely ecstatic about the changes, it's amazing, awesome and overdue for workers in Alberta — just the impact it'll have on the quality of life in Alberta and by aligning us with the rest of the provinces," said Leigh Golden, executive director of the Workers' Resource Centre (WRC).

Aside from reducing the re-

quired number of months worked to qualify for compensation for parents looking after sick kids or fleeing domestic violence, it also bans paying disabled employees less than the minimum wage and makes it easier for workers to recoup withheld pay.

Gray cited the case of Lethbridge's Amanda Jensen, who was fired from her job last year after taking time off to care for her cancer-stricken son.

WRC staffers said they're familiar with similar cases, with case worker Keith Shustov recalling a woman who'd booked off four unpaid days to look after a sick child.

"Subsequently, she was let go by the employer, who said they were looking for someone more reliable," said Shustov.

A provision banning paying the disabled below the minimum was praised by Brad Robertson, who said he's suffered such discrimination in the past.

"This is a symbolic day because it brings equality into the workforce . . . nobody is worth less than the minimum wage," said Robertson,

65.

Gray said only a "small minority" of Alberta employers don't already employ provisions of the law.

"Most employers in Alberta are already surpassing these standards," she said.

While the Chamber's Addington said most Albertans rightly endorse the employment standards section of the bill, employers have concerns over provisions she says overly favour unions.

It relaxes the requirements for union certification and takes the onus off unions to prove unfair labour practises, said Addington — changes not needed in Alberta.

"Alberta's unique, Alberta's been very successful in being a competitive place and there's got to be a better reason than just being like other provinces," she said, adding the government is reluctant to discuss that part of the bill.

"They seem to be focused much more on the employment standards code."

Critics say the two parts of the bill should be split.

Most of the legislation is intended to take effect Jan. 1, 2018, and will be preceded by educational sessions for employers, said Gray. *BKaufmann@postmedia.com*  
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