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FAST FACTS

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Hostile Labour Relations Cause Unnecessary Conflict with Brandon’s Public Sector Workers

Last week, the Manitoba Labour Board reinstated Brandon Professional Fire Fighters/Paramedics Association president Wade Ritchie in his job as a fire fighter. The city of Brandon had fired Ritchie in January, claiming he had made “reckless and defamatory statements” that justified his termination. The Union disagreed, on the grounds that the statements in question were actually part of the normal business of the Union and that Ritchie, as Union president, had been legitimately fulfilling his duty to enforce the collective agreement – terms to which the City had already agreed. The Union also suggested that firing the Union president just as the City and the Fire Fighters were preparing to bargain a new contract looked more like a bargaining tactic than real discipline, and the message to other union members that their exercise of union rights could lead to termination was sure to create a chill on the negotiations. The Board’s unprecedented decision to reinstate Ritchie immediately, in advance of and pending formal arbitration, was a strong rebuke to the City of Brandon. The Board, which represents both employers and employees, not only agreed with the Union, but ordered the City to broadcast its decision to the entire department.

Mr. Ritchie and the other fire fighters and paramedics were greatly relieved by the Board’s

decision. They know the ruling isn’t just about Wade; it’s about protecting other union members from that kind of intimidation. But the City’s choice to play hard ball with its fire fighters and paramedics is clearly no accident. Grant Mitchell, the high-priced labour-relations lawyer who argued the case against Ritchie, is an advisor to the Canadian Labour Watch Association, a Vancouver-based anti-union organization that specializes in breaking unions. Mitchell recently led Brandon University into a bitter and unnecessary strike from which students and faculty are still recovering. The City has also hired Canadian Professional Management Services, Inc. (CPMS) to bargain with its unions.

Claiming that the Human Resources Department was currently overloaded, the City offered no explanation about why a Vancouver consulting firm, CPMS, was hired to do the work. We suggest that the hiring originates in the tight relationship between CPMS and Canadian Fire Chiefs (CFC). In 2010, CPMS and CFC collaborated in establishing an International Conference for Fire and Rescue Executives. The Brandon Fire Department participated in the inaugural conference, “Chiefs Under Fire...Are You Ready?” held in Calgary. Mohamed Doma (who was advising the City on labour relations



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and leading negotiations for the City with the Fire Fighters at the time Wade Ritchie was fired) was a keynote speaker. A second conference, “Leadership at the Edge of Reason,” was held in Toronto in 2011, and again the Brandon Fire Department was there and Mohamed Doma was a speaker. This year, the Conference, “Leadership in Critical Times,” is slated for Vancouver, and again Mohamed Doma is a keynote speaker in a session titled, “Protecting Your Management Rights: Your Critical Role.” In his presentation Doma will explain how fire chiefs lost control of management rights and will propose strategies for getting them back. The interesting thing about the Vancouver conference is that Chief Brent Dane is also on a panel, “Chiefs Under Fire,” and his topic is, “Leadership Control: What Does It Take?: A Case Study.” The program promises that the case study “will address the common concern that the union is ruining the [firehouse culture] and applying the international code for ‘bringing down the chief.’ [The question:] What does it take to regain management control in these situations?”

Mitchell and CPMS charge hefty fees for their services, and we question how ethical it is for the City of Brandon – or Brandon University – to spend lavishly from public funds to attack its unions. There was no evidence of serious labour relations problems before the city hired anti-union consultants. We also question why the City of Brandon has adopted such an aggressive stance even before starting to bargain with the fire fighters and paramedics, and how such a hostile management style and the poisoned workplace climate it creates will affect the vital services that these workers provide. Fire fighters in other cities that have also hired Mitchell are anticipating the same kind of anti-union bargaining and management style. Some union members have even heard that their cities want the right to call in students from the fire college as volunteer fire fighters, and hope to create “mixed” forces,

in which unpaid volunteers with no insurance coverage, pay, or benefits work alongside paid, professional fire fighters. The growing trend of cities to create “mixed” police forces by using cadets and volunteers like Citizens on Patrol in place of professional police officers raises questions about how insurance rates are affected. In short, it’s clear that this case is about more than one worker in Brandon; this move is part of a broader attempt by cities to adopt a US model that uses volunteers, who have no union protection or other workplace rights, as first responders.

On the other hand, public sector unionized workforces that are given decent pay and benefits return benefits to the public in high productivity, low turnover and low training costs. A well-trained core of long-term skilled workers also reduces the costs of undertaking new functions (the paramedic function for ambulance drivers, for example) and paves the way for the development and application of innovations in the delivery of services. Whether the task is road maintenance, post-secondary education, or hospital care, the employers, the workers, and their unions share a common goal: to provide the highest quality services at an affordable cost. That these services have been provided without significant conflict for decades suggests that there is nothing wrong with the model or the labour relations legislation that supports it. On the contrary, the current problems appear to be caused by the City, which has adopted an aggressive stance toward its unionized workers, to the detriment of Brandon citizens. Ideally, labour relations in the public sector should strive to avoid conflict – not create it – but focus on goodwill, respectful treatment, and responsible collaboration in the shared goal of ensuring sustainable, high-quality services to citizens.

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