



Derrol Holmeister, sharpshooter photography

WILD ABOUT LARRY Hubich's been business lobby enemy number one this year.

LABOUR PAIN

SFL boss Larry Hubich is bloodied but unbowed after a tough year. After all, it could be worse

by David Shield

This Labour Day wouldn't appear to be the ideal time to be president of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour (SFL).

Larry Hubich still flinches at the mention of the provincial government's hotly contested "Most Available Hours" legislation, which went down in flames earlier this year. And he bristles at the number of employers returning to old school hardball tactics at the bargaining table.

You might think he'd be ready to throw up his hands in despair, leaving someone younger, and dumber, to run the gauntlet.

You'd be wrong. In the tradition of trade union true believers everywhere, Hubich has the confidence of a man with history on his side. He also has the numbers. In the three years since he became president in 2002, the SFL's membership has grown by 11,000 members, to its present standing of 95,000 province-wide.

Despite media stereotypes that depict unions as anachronistic hangovers of an earlier industrial age, Hubich says the trade union movement is actually a growth industry.

"In Canada, the trade union movement is holding its own," says Hubich. "The number of unionized workers is increasing. The density, as a percentage of the workforce, may be decreasing marginally—but that's only because of an increase of service workers in the economy; who work in a precarious environment, with minimum wage, part-time jobs with no benefits."

There are more surprises.

Buy into the Hollywood image of working class men and their union leaders as hard-hat rednecks who don't really understand the modern economy and just bog down innovation and enterprise?

Guess what? Hubich's a computer programmer. He's smart, he's articulate and—as many an under-prepared management bargainer who has made the mistake of underestimating the mild mannered Hubich will tell you—he's dangerous.

As Tommy Douglas used to say, "Watch out for the little fellow with an idea."

And Hubich is an ideas guy.

Born and raised in small town Saskatchewan (Strasbourg and Leader), Hubich was a Saskatchewan Wheat Pool man, where he got involved with the Grain Services Union in 1982. He joined the SFL's Executive Council in 1990 and ran successfully for president in 2002.

"We need, now more than ever, organizations like unions and umbrella organizations like labour centrals to provide a voice for working folks and also a voice for all workers, whether they're organized or unorganized," says Hubich. "There's a concentration of media, fewer and fewer organizations are owning more and more of our economy and there's a growing gap between those that have and those that don't."

"Now more than ever, unions are needed to ensure there's some modicum of democracy, and public discourse, in our democracy," he says.

Speaking of democracy, one of Hubich's jobs is to get face time with the provincial government.

"Are they labour-friendly?" asks Hubich? "Well, they're not beating

us up. They're not coming in here and ripping up legislation that gives workers basic rights and the ability to join the union of their choice. This certainly isn't a [B.C. Liberal Premier] Gordon Campbell style of government that goes in and attacks workers."

Organized labour's relationship with the NDP was certainly put to the test earlier this year during the debate over the Province's "Most Available Hours" legislation. The act would have compelled large employers to convert more precarious part-time jobs, with no benefits, into full-time jobs with benefits.

Hubich called the bill an important bulwark against the "Walmartization of work."

"27 hours a week at marginally above minimum wage with no rights and benefits is not going to sustain our society," he argues, "because people who work in that kind of job don't have any disposable income."

It would be an extreme understatement to say he's disappointed the Province backed down from enacting the legislation.

"The campaign against that legislation was rooted in misinformation, fear and outright lies," says Hubich. "And I say that without equivocation. The various business groups in the community were engaged in a campaign of distortion of the facts, and that resulted in government backing away from the legislation, because they didn't have the political courage to do what was right," he says.

"If Woodrow Lloyd had the same lack of courage in 1962 that we saw on most available hours, we wouldn't have Medicare in this country."

CAN-WEST ENEMY NUMBER 1

Hubich has taken his fair share of lumps from the province's press corps this year. From a shrill personal attack by *Leader-Post* Executive Editor Bob Hughes to being called "crazy" by the *L-P's* Murray Mandryk, Hubich certainly appears to have ruffled his share of CanWest feathers.

He's got kids, so being portrayed as Public Enemy Number One doesn't make him particularly happy, but he shrugs it off as an occupational hazard. He knew when he stepped into the job that the establishment press wouldn't be heralding him as a Working Class Hero.

"Sometimes things get personal. My only hope would be that there would be a little more balance in reporting, because I don't think there is," he says.

Hubich says business lobby groups generally get much more, and more favourable, media attention than labour groups. According to Hubich's math, the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour's 95,000 members each live in a household with an average of 2.5 people. Do the math, he says.

"We really represent around a quarter of a million taxpayers in the province of Saskatchewan. So, we represent more taxpayers in the province of Saskatchewan than the right-wing Canadian Taxpayers Federation represents in the whole country. But who's getting the most media exposure?" he asks.



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