

Chamber's labor forum draws good input

Halton Hills business people are worried and upset over the Ontario government's proposed labour law reform and they would like to see the government scrap proposals which will strengthen unions and weaken businesses even further, in the midst of a recession.

That message was brought home loud and clear last week during a forum on proposed changes to the Labour Relations Act organized by the Halton Hills Chamber of Commerce.

About 30 people attended the

event in the Halton Hills Cultural Centre and it was clear from the start that those defending the legislation had a long and rocky road ahead of them.

Doug Penrice, a Chamber member, told the six-member panel addressing the meeting that big businesses won't suffer from the proposals because they're already unionized. However, small businesses, like those that predominate the Halton Hills business community, will be hurt by proposed amendments that will make it easier

to unionize.

On hand to defend government proposals were Brantford MPP Brad Ward, the NDP's parliamentary assistant for the Ministry of Trade and Technology and Ken Signoretti, executive vice-president of the 800,000-member Ontario Federation of Labour.

Arguing that the new proposals will hurt investments and jobs in Ontario were the four remaining panelists: Linda Ciglen, director of provincial affairs, Ontario, Canadian Federation of Independent Business, which represents 40,000 small businesses in the province; Wellington MPP Ted Arnott, the Progressive Conservative Party critic for the Ministry of Tourism and Recreation; Don Eastman, vice-president, policy, Ontario Chamber of Commerce and senior manager of commercial research for Dofasco Inc. and Mississauga North MPP Steven Offer, the Liberal Party's labour critic.

Ward said the legislation, which is expected to become law before the end of the year, represents the first major changes to the Ontario Labour Relations Act (OLRA) since 1975. He said changes were needed to reflect a changing workforce and workplace in Ontario.

Signoretti said the major issue behind the new legislation is "one of access." He said surveys have shown that one out of four workers in Ontario want to talk to a union organizer, but under the present system, are afraid they'll get fired if they do so.

The proposed labour reforms have been suggested "for purely political reasons,"

Ciglen told the crowd. She said the government is simply paying back "I.O.U.s to labour." A murmur from the audience indicated agreement with that statement.

While acknowledging that the current labour law is "antiquated and outdated," Eastman suggested proposals to take away the secret ballot in union organizing and replace it solely with signed cards for certification is "a blatant abuse of human rights."

He argued that the proposals will worsen the relationship between unions and management at a time when good relations are most important—during negotiation of a first contract.

Disagreeing with earlier statements by Ward that the consultative process leading up to the reform proposals had been extensive and receptive to new ideas, Offer said, "A great many business people felt excluded by it."

He criticized the government for its unwillingness to conduct an extensive analysis to see how

reforms might impact on the retail, manufacturing and agricultural sectors. He charged that the proposals will change the Labour Relations Board "from an impartial arbitrator to one tilted in favor of labour."

Arnott charged that the legislation is "a reaction to the decline of industries with union members," rather than a reflection of a changing workforce, as suggested by Ward.

He said a study by Ernst and Young indicates that the labour law amendments will destroy jobs in Ontario.

While Signoretti attempted to appease the crowd on several occasions by telling them that the "legislation doesn't change the dynamics" of union organizing because employees of large and small businesses have the right to organize unions now, most of the audience appeared to feel differently.

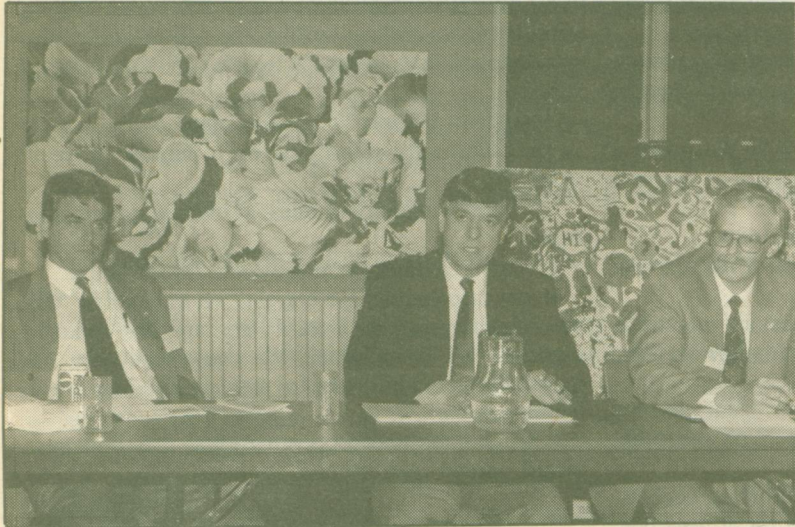
Norma Elliott, owner of Georgetown Terminal Warehouse, said she didn't appreciate the gov-

ernment trying to tell her "what to do." She added: "I am browned off."

Her sentiments appeared to pervade the largely partisan group that formed the audience. At times, the discussion broke into heated debate, sometimes between panelists and sometimes between members of the audience and one of the panelists. However, meeting chairman and moderator, Lois Fraser, also a member of the Halton Hills Chamber of Commerce, managed to keep debate at a civilized level.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the Chamber's chairman of government issues John

Duncan urged local business people to tell the government how they feel about the proposed labour changes. "We gotta fight for it," he said, meaning that Halton Hills' business will need a strong, unified voice if it wants to have a significant impact on destroying or changing the government's labour reform proposals.



Among panelists fielding questions from Halton Hills business people and residents at last week's public forum on proposed changes to the Ontario Labour Relations Act were: Brantford MPP Brad Ward, left; Ontario Federation of Labour executive vice-president Ken Signoretti and Ontario Chamber of Commerce vice-president of policy Don Eastman. About 30 people attended the meeting at the Halton Hills Cultural Centre, Georgetown.



The Ontario government's proposed labour reforms were strongly criticized by three panelists participating in last week's public forum organized by the Halton Hills Chamber of Commerce. Suggesting that the proposed changes would hurt business investment and job opportunities in Ontario were: Mississauga North MPP Steven Offer; director of provincial affairs, Ontario, for the Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses Linda Ciglen and Wellington MPP Ted Arnott.

Queen's Park Report

By NOEL DUIGNAN
Halton North MPP

I'm sure you've heard that Citizenship Minister Elaine Ziemba introduced Employment Equity legislation a couple of weeks ago and I'd like to talk about what the Bill means. Ms. Ziemba called it a "historic piece of legislation...rooted in extensive public consultations" and she praised the work of Juanita Westmoreland-Traore, Ontario's first Employment Equity Commissioner, who held meetings across the province and received more than 400 submissions from business, labor, and community groups. The Commissioner's consultation report was released on June 25th to complement the introduction of our legislation.

We need to draw upon the talents and skills of all our people and employment equity involves comprehensive and cooperative strategies to tap the abilities of highly capable individuals who've been excluded in the past. It makes good business sense and it's fair. The legislation will require employers to adopt hiring, promotion and employment practices which provide equal opportunity for all employees. It will cover the people from groups which have been historically denied equal job opportunities as a result of discriminatory practices.

Which groups will be covered? The groups designated to be covered by the legislation are aboriginal peoples, people with disabilities, racial minorities, and women. These groups now make up 60 per cent of the Ontario workforce.

Which employers are covered? All employers are expected to work toward realising equality in their workplaces but the Employment Equity Act specifies the following requirements:

- Full Requirements
1. The Ontario Public Service.
 2. The Broader Public Sector (municipalities, school boards, hospitals, for example) with 50 plus employees.
 3. The Private Sector with 100 plus employees.
- Streamlined Requirements
1. The Broader Public Sector with 10 to 49 employees.
 2. The Private Sector with 50 to 99 employees.

What are full and streamlined requirements?
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