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Ignore red flags at your peril

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WHEN you see a red flag, you know you're headed for danger.

The Manitoba Jobs Agreement is being promoted by our provincial government as a bold step forward for Manitoba workers, when it is actually an unnecessary policy that is littered with red flags.

The agreement discriminates against 88 per cent of construction workers who are not in a union. It is giving preference to unionized contractors over non-union contractors and is forcing non-union contractors to use unionized workers if they need to add more workers to their team. This is a huge red flag.

Let's be clear — this is not about being pro or anti-union. Workers in Manitoba have the right to choose their preferred labour model, and they have exercised that right. Of roughly 57,000 workers in the province's construction sector, more than 50,000 have chosen to work in open-shop, non-union environments. That choice matters. It should not be overridden by government policy.

Imposing rules that give hiring preference to unions on publicly funded projects essentially sidelines 88 per cent of the construction workforce from working on taxpayer-funded projects. If the reverse were true, the outcry would be immediate and justified.

With the agreement in place, hospitals, schools and roads could cost Manitoba taxpayers 20 per cent more. Much of this money is being funnelled directly to unions, with no accountability and no clear return on investment. This is another red flag.

At a time when the government is emphasizing affordability by cutting taxes, addressing grocery prices and reducing fuel costs, this added burden on taxpayers is impossible to justify. Every dollar wasted is a dollar not available for investing in our schools, hospitals, infrastructure or frontline workers.

The agreement also introduces a mandatory payment of 85 cents per hour for every person working on the project. This surcharge is incurred whether this worker belongs to a union or not, with the money being sent directly to unions. This unprecedented requirement raises serious questions. What is the purpose of this payment? What measurable outcomes will it achieve? How much money will it generate? What are the funds being used for?

So far, there are no clear answers. Unfortunately, the red flags don't stop there.

The agreement complicates things as simple as the definition of a worker. In an industry where the work is seasonal and temporary layoffs are common, the agreement forces companies to increase their workforce through a union hall before they can recall existing employees who are on seasonal layoff.

For thousands of skilled Manitobans, this could mean losing access to a job they are qualified to do, simply because they do not hold a union card.

If the government's true goal is to ensure that public projects employ Manitobans, there is a far simpler solution. They can simply require contractors to certify that their workforce consists of Manitoba residents. This approach would support local employment without introducing unnecessary bureaucracy or discrimination.

And finally, the government has tried to claim that all of this is necessary to prevent strikes and lockouts. However, this does not align with reality. There is little evidence that labour disruptions have been a widespread issue across Manitoba's construction industry in recent years.

Historically, labour disruptions are associated with unionized bargaining environments. The government is using the agreement to solve a problem that has not been clearly demonstrated, while creating new problems in the process. This is not sound policymaking. It is simply raising more red flags.

For more than two years, the provincial government negotiated this agreement behind closed doors with unions. During that time, they didn't talk to any of the contractors or subcontractors who employ most of the construction workers in Manitoba.

That lack of engagement is not just disappointing; it undermines confidence in the policy itself. Manitobans deserve policies that expand opportunities, respect workers' choices and deliver real value for taxpayers' dollars. The agreement, in its current form, falls short on all of this.

The core issue here is fairness. As Manitoba's construction associations, we didn't agree to this. Worst of all, Manitobans can't afford it. These red flags cannot be ignored.

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