

EMD dispute demands more of government

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During the present Caterpillar Electro-Motive Diesel lock-out, Londoners are pondering the effects this situation will have on our local economy and an already high number of unemployed workers. Contrary to misconceptions, the Electro-motive workers are not on strike. They are simply carrying signs and standing outside the fence erected by Caterpillar to state that they are locked out of work by their employer.

Thoughtful citizens, for the most part, are in sympathy with Electro-Motive workers since the closure of the plant would add to London's economic woes. This is leaving aside the natural concern for workers who are left without pensions, employment insurance, health care supplements, seniority or vacation credits and other benefits that usually accrue to employed people. In addition to these important considerations, there is the anxiety of the workers themselves standing outside in winter weather, parading in front of their former work-place, knowing that they have just received what is may be their last pay cheque. They are facing a very uncertain future. All the while, workers contemplate moving to other cities in their discouraging search for work as the rising costs of groceries, home heating, gasoline and their children's education remind them of their unfortunate situation.

Some observers believe that the proper business of employers is to maximize profits, keep customers satisfied, and maintain happy shareholders. Further, they argue that it is not the business of the company to concern itself with unemployment or to listen to stories of financial hardships resulting from the company's maximization of profits. It is reasoned that the CEO of the most "successful" companies deserves a generous salary—often up to two-hundred times that of the average worker.

For many companies, ethical justice, equality and workers' needs are not of concern. On Kohlberg's six-point scale of moral maturity, the lowest moral level consists of only caring for one's own interests and needs. Of course, not all companies operate on this level, but in the case of Caterpillar, their reputation precedes them. Their previous behavior indicates what can be expected as they go about their hiring and firing and lock-out procedures.

This raises the question of the role of our political "leaders": Some time ago, our Prime Minister stood on the Electro-Motive plant floor in London and offered generous tax concessions. This was a great photo-opportunity for any politician, and too tempting for the Prime Minister to pass up. On that occasion, he also pointed out government involvement in job creation. It is unclear whether or not government agreements were also made as to obligations the plant owners would have toward keeping Electro-Motive Diesel operating in London as a *quid-pro-quo* for tax concessions. If such agreements were made, surely the public, the provider of tax concessions, has a right to know about these arrangements. If agreements were not made, given the sorry history of Caterpillar's labour relations, why were such arrangements overlooked? In the first case, political leaders should have been more involved in reaching an agreement that would protect Canadian jobs, and in the current situation, our government should be more involved in mediating

negotiations and finding possible solutions. The present response of governing politicians has been the *laissez-faire* statement that the situation is simply a matter of the CAW and Caterpillar working out details without involvement, or even interest, on the government's part.

In general terms, we cherish our free-enterprise and democratic form of government. Yet this system does not work well in the current economic down-turn. What we have presently, functions well for the wealthy top 5%, but not well for the 95 % of our population that are continually pressured into down-sizing their life-styles and salaries. The middle-class is gradually being pressed downward. When this large group arrives in their downward spiral to join with the poorer class, our whole economic system will change. They will not have money to buy homes, new cars, new furniture, or all the other things that keep Canada from becoming a third-world country. It is now and not off in the future, that responsible governments must adjust their attitudes, as well as Canadian laws and regulations, to take a more inclusive view of the well-being of our whole Canadian population.