

Business

Hundreds rally around CWB Tory tactics take heavy heat from protesters on Main Street

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Beausejour farmer Andy Baker presents Canadian Wheat Board president Adrian Measner with a shovel to use against anyone trying to shut down the grain marketing agency, during a rally in front of the wheat board building on Main Street Thursday afternoon. The rally was organized by Friends of the Wheat Board, a coalition of "rural and urban Canadians in support of a democratic, farmer-controlled Canadian Wheat Board".

Strahl wrote Measner saying he was contemplating his removal as CEO and giving him until Thursday to respond in writing.

Measner told the crowd, who were munching on baking and dainties prepared by or paid for by CWB staff, that he had faxed a response to Strahl moments earlier.

He said he told the minister he continued to support the wheat board as the single-desk seller of grain and the government should let the farmer-elected directors run the organization.

"I find it incredible the lack of respect the minister has for this farmer-elected board of directors," Measner said, adding that Strahl has replaced directors without notifying the chairman, refused to hold meaningful discussions with directors on the organization's future and prevented them from speaking freely with farmers.

The rally at the wheat board offices at 423 Main St. was preceded by a spirited meeting Thursday morning involving 350 farmers and other CWB supporters at the Oak Bluff Community Centre.

Both rallies were organized by a group calling itself Friends of the Wheat Board, a coalition of rural and urban Canadians.

A busload of farmers from Saskatchewan spent 8 to 10 hours on the road to attend the rallies. Others drove in from across Manitoba.

PLACARD-carrying farmers, saying they're angry at Ottawa for trying to seize control of the Canadian Wheat Board, rallied outside the CWB offices Thursday, cheering loudly for its embattled president.

A few hundred farmers, joined by federal and provincial politicians, wheat board staff and other Winnipeggers, chanted "Measner, Measner, Measner" in support of wheat board president and CEO Adrian Measner, who has been given notice by the Harper government that he will likely be fired.

Jan Baker, a farmer from Beausejour, presented Measner with a basket of bread, pasta and "a few beers" made with Prairie-grown wheat and barley.

Her husband, Andy, gave Measner a grain shovel on behalf of the group, with an inscription saying it was to be used by wheat board management and staff "to chuck (Agriculture Minister Chuck) Strahl, Harper or any other dictators who attempt to interfere in the marketing of Prairie grain and farmer control of the Canadian Wheat Board."

Event organizers presented a giant key to Manitoba farmers Bill Toews and Bill Nicholson, both CWB directors, as a symbolic gesture to ward off meddling politicians.

Many Prairie farmers are angry at a series of actions by Ottawa that include a gag order on certain wheat board communications, interference in wheat board director elections, replacing government-appointed directors before their terms are up, and threatening Measner's dismissal.

What Measner said in his letter to Strahl:

WHEAT board president and CEO Adrian Measner said he made two key points in a letter to Agriculture Minister Chuck Strahl on Thursday:

"The first was based on my 32 years of experience in the grain industry and based on the direction given to me by the farmer-elected board of directors -- I will continue to support the single desk marketing of Prairie grain.

"And second was to let the farmer-elected board of directors run this organization. They've done a tremendous job and let them continue."

Sporting signs with messages such as "CWB Let it Be," "Dictator Strahl" and "Let's 'Chuck' Strahl," they expressed frustration with what they called the Harper government's undemocratic actions and passed a resolution demanding that Measner not be fired.

"Minister Strahl, you won't silence me and you won't silence the farmers of Western Canada," said East Selkirk farmer Doug Chorney, a member of the group Real Voice for Choice, which helped organize the rallies.

Stewart Wells, president of the National Farmers Union, said the Conservatives were attempting the "equivalent of a hostile takeover" of the wheat board by naming directors that share its aim of ending the CWB as the single-desk grain seller.

After elections that concluded on Sunday, farmers supporting the wheat board's sales monopoly continue to control its board of directors, holding eight of the 10 elected positions. Ottawa controls five appointments to the 15-person board, including that of the CEO.

There was evidence Thursday that Conservative supporters are also angry at the government's tactics in the wheat board debate.

Brenda Goran, who farms at Grandview, said she supported Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservatives in the last federal election and agrees with many of his initiatives, but "I don't agree with what he's doing here."

She said she disagrees with the government view that the wheat board can survive in a so-called dual marketing system. "I don't think that's even a possibility. It just won't work."

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