

Hospital cleaning and food staff should get 'family-supporting' wages, poll says

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VANCOUVER - Nine out of 10 British Columbians say provincial health authorities should require cleaning and food-service contractors to pay "family-supporting" wages, according to poll done for the Hospital Employees Union.

And 81 per cent say no public money should go to contractors who don't pay decent wages.

The findings surfaced in polling done in mid-March for the union by Viewpoints Research, whose clients include the provincial government, Imperial Oil, Metro Vancouver, BC Hydro and the Vancouver Opera.

The results are being released as the union prepares to bargain several major hospital contracts - and the provincial Liberals continue to reject a call by the B.C. Federation of Labour to hike the minimum wage to \$10 an hour.

Wages and affordability, especially in Metro Vancouver, are expected to be an issue as campaigning begins for next May's provincial election.

Four of B.C.'s health authorities hold \$640 million in contracts with three multinational corporations Compass, Sodexo and Aramark for feeding of patients and cleaning of hospitals. Most of their 3,500 workers in B.C. earn about \$13 an hour and receive minimal benefits, the union says.

The majority of the contracts are due to expire in September.

The polling numbers are being released to coincide with the union's launch of a Living Wage Campaign for workers at contracted-out hospital services.

Judy Darcy, the union's business manager, said the union is calling for health authorities to make living wages a condition of any commercial contracts they sign with corporate contractors.

Attaching such conditions is a growing movement. More than 130 U.S. cities and counties have passed laws requiring government contracts to include local "living wage" requirements to government contracts. In England, the Greater London Authority introduced a "fair-employment" clause into contracting procedures in 2002, and several of London's big financial institutions and hospitals have implemented fair wage policies or practices for contract workers.

In 2002, the provincial Liberals passed Bill 29, contracting out the jobs of thousands of cleaning and dietary staff at B.C. facilities. Wages fell

immediately by \$9, to \$10 an hour, and have since risen to about \$13 as the union organized the job sites.

The telephone survey of 607 British Columbians was conducted between March 9 and 15 and is considered accurate to within plus or minus 4.1 per cent, 19 times out of 20.

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