



First Nations bargaining delegates deliver strong message of unity

About a dozen delegates gathered at the Fishermen's Hall in Prince Rupert for the union's premier provincial First Nations Bargaining Conference May 22-23.

It was the first time representatives from each nation – Nisga'a, Gitxsan (Gitanyow, Gitwangak), Skidegate (Haida Gwaii), Stz'uminus – came together to share bargaining ideas and strategies.

"It does really help with the four nations having one voice to negotiate a united agreement," said wellness counsellor Loretta Morgan of the Gitxsan (Gitanyow Human Services Authority) local.

"Any time people get together, it's unity, power," added elder and family support worker Peter Thompson of the Skidegate local (Xaaynangaa Naay Health Centre). "It's very important that everybody comes with a point of view to make a greater difference."



"I feel united and respectful," said personal care aide Ingrid Seymour of the H'ulh-etn local (CFN-Stz'uminus Health Unit). "We strengthen as one."

Brighter Futures Coordinator Sheila Seymour (Stz'uminus) agreed. "There are greater possibilities being united. Hope."

During the two-day plenary, delegates identified bargaining issues and priorities, and brainstormed on ways to best generate support for their bargaining agenda.

After greetings from elder Murray Smith of the Tsimshian nation – honouring the territory of the nine Allied Tribes – HEU's coordinator of servicing Kathy Jessome provided an inspiring bargaining history of First Nations HEU contracts. She described the union's long journey in securing the legal right to organize, certify and negotiate contracts for First Nations people regardless of living on federal or native land.

This was achieved in a landmark Supreme Court of Canada decision on July 19, 1999 after the union organized Gitxsan health care workers. *...more*



Delegates were engaged in a number of discussions about their current collective agreements, shared personal ways of coping with stress (such as smudging, praying, creating traditional art), and demonstrated a strong sense of solidarity in having a unified contract for all nations.

Main issues identified include: interpretation, clarification and enforcement of contract language; protection from employer bullying (including fear of filing grievances); workload; health and safety (earthquake preparedness); scheduling and classifications; wages and benefits (including isolation allowances), and contracting out.

They also talked about the lack of child care subsidies for band-run daycare centres; band structures; internal oppression; the ongoing problem of colonization; the unique cultural traditions of each village; and geographical isolation (access to ambulances or public transportation; road access during landslides).

The union's secretary-business manager Bonnie Pearson discussed some of the unique issues and challenges First Nations HEU members experience, but acknowledged common themes that impact all HEU members, including workload, low staffing levels, stress and burnout, and health and safety.

Pearson also spoke about the results of the provincial election and working with a re-elected Liberal government.

"The Liberals have to come to terms with the value of public sector workers," said Pearson. "We need to restore respect for people who deliver public services. Stable, well-staffed, well-funded public services are important. The work you do with your band councils and your nations plays a vital role in that. The various components of health care work well when we all work together."

"When people are oppressed, they are afraid," said community wellness counsellor Lydia Stephens of the Nisga'a Valley Health Board (Greenville Health Centre) local. "Gone are the days of residential schools. I want my brothers and sisters to be strong and have a strong voice. I'd like us to achieve a united agreement that covers all First Nations members. There's strength in numbers... It's good to know that we have the same issues that our brothers and sisters who are not First Nations have, and to know that we have their support."

Added patient travel clerk Karen Leeson of the Nisga'a Gitwinksihlkw (Canyon) local: "We need strong unions in every community. Bringing us together here gives us strength and equality."

"The big thing is the awareness that we're all going through the same thing," said receptionist/patient transfer clerk Crystal Zeller of Skidegate (Xaaynangaa Naay). "We are all isolated in our communities, and you don't feel so alone when you come together like this."

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