



Independent Bargaining Conference delegates tackle challenges in seniors' care

Delegates from seniors' care facilities across B.C. gathered May 29 to 31 for HEU's third Independent Bargaining Conference for Seniors' Care, under the banner "Quality Jobs for Quality Care."

With more than 8,000 members across 92 worksites, and 78 separate collective agreements in long term care, assisted living and independent living facilities, it's a complex sector.

The conference opened with exercises and presentations to explore the differences and commonalities among workplaces, review the sector's history and frame today's context for bargaining.

HEU Secretary-Business Manager Jennifer Whiteside thanked members for the difficult and important work they do caring for seniors, emphasizing how fragmentation and lack of accountability in the current system impacts working and caring conditions.

Members were also excited to hear Wednesday morning that the B.C. Legislature formally passed its amendments to the Labour Code, which include stronger successorship provisions to protect workers from the damage of contract flipping.

Although these changes, along with last fall's repeal of Bills 29 and 94, and the government's increased funding for staffing hours, are beginning to repair the damage, much work remains to be done, Whiteside said.

Building solidarity with coordinated bargaining

The first day wrapped up with members from three multi-site bargaining units presenting "Consolidated Bargaining Success Stories." Although most facilities have individual collective agreements, others have been able to bargain together under a "common employer" to increase their bargaining power.

Members working for the Sienna Group, CareCorp and Good Samaritan Canada talked about the challenges and gains during their recent rounds of bargaining, their strategies, and the factors that led to successful agreements.

Amy, a member working for CareCorp, described the unity that developed between members in two certifications at two sites with the same employer, 200 km apart on Vancouver Island.

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“I think the biggest gain we made in this round was the realization that we are powerful together and that it doesn’t stop after the bargaining table. I know that the solidarity we have will continue and that if the employer throws a curveball at us we can face it together.

Setting bargaining priorities

A central goal of the conference was to review and affirm provincial bargaining priorities.

Unlike the Facilities, Community Social Services and Community Health bargaining conferences, where members vote on specific demands to bring to the table for their sector-wide agreements, members in the Independent Sector focus on setting priorities and goals that will direct negotiations for their individual contracts.

Bargaining themes centered on job security, fair compensation and working conditions for quality care. Members spent the second day of the conference in working groups and plenaries discussing how to use these priorities to guide bargaining and organizing work at their locals.

Members also heard highlights from the author of a soon-to-be-published study on BC’s assisted living sector. Co-sponsored by HEU, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and the BC Health Coalition, “Choice, Autonomy and Quality of Care: Are They Working in BC’s Assisted Living?” is authored by Dr. Karen-Marie Elah Perry and features the stories of HEU members.

Finding our voice

Fragmentation in the independent sector generates significant challenges to recruitment and retention of staff, heavy workloads, low wages and lack of job security, all of which compromise members’ ability to provide continuity and quality of care.

So on the final day of the conference, members gathered in small groups to build stories about their workplaces and develop short presentations that capture the problems in the sector and propose solutions.

Five BC NDP MLAs were welcomed as guests at the conference that day to hear the presentations: Raj Chouhan (Burnaby-Edmonds), Janet Routledge (Burnaby North), Bowinn Ma (North Vancouver-Lonsdale), Anne Kang (Burnaby-Deer Lake) and Rachna Singh (Surrey-Green Timbers).

HEU members from each region addressed the MLAs and recounted the challenges they face on the job, and the impact that short-staffing, workload and job insecurity have on the seniors they care for. The heartfelt stories were powerful, raw, and often emotional. Members spoke of residents who may go for weeks without a bath because of short staffing, and about the need for proper assessment of residents with complex needs, to better prevent and manage aggression and violent incidents.

A chef spoke of the drop in the quality of food he must prepare. Care aides told of residents missing breakfast or being fed biscuits and juice because there was not enough staff and not enough lifts to get them to the dining room in time.

And an LPN spoke of how lack of bathing, heavy medication, and staffing ratios as high as one to ten during the day and one to 37 at night, compromises residents' health and increases the chance of falls.

“Our situation could be so much better if our employer’s main goal was not to make money off the backs of workers like us and the vulnerable residents.”

Following the presentations, Minister of Health Adrian Dix spoke about the need for change in the sector and the value and commitment of HEU’s support for seniors’ care.

He told members during his talk: “We need activists. We need people to care for seniors. Be active. Stay active. Fight hard. Believe we can build a better world together. We owe that to our children, our parents, and to one another.”

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