



HOSPITAL EMPLOYEES' UNION

NEWSLETTER

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Building member power key theme of HEU fall school

More than 120 HEU activists from across the province gathered at the Anvil Centre in New Westminster this week for an energizing and inspiring fall school program.

The weeklong session kicked off on Sunday night with a full agenda that included solidarity greetings from Qayqayt First Nation Chief Rhonda Larrabee, a Resilient Leadership panel by community organizer Stephanie Fung of Chinatown Action Group and activist Omar Chu of Sanctuary Health Collective, and messages from HEU president Victor Elkins and secretary-business manager Jennifer Whiteside.

In his opening remarks, Elkins acknowledged the high number of new activists in attendance, and thanked members for stepping up in a leadership capacity.

“It is new activists like you who are the future of HEU,” said Elkins. “To those activists we call seasoned or veteran HEU members, I want to thank you for your dedication and years of service to your union.

“We rely on leaders like you to mentor our new members and young workers to become our future activists and leaders.”

Whiteside’s keynote address included discussions on bargaining, equity, and the roles of unions and their activists.

“The only way we’re going to be strong enough to fight back, is to make sure we have the strong foundation we need with our members and our communities,” said Whiteside. “That comes by building power. I know that this idea of ‘building worker power’ sounds abstract. And that is fundamentally what you’re going to do this week – spend time unpacking this idea about power, and learning and thinking about how power works, and how your role in the union helps to build a fighting union.

“In the context of this school, we are all here to deepen our understanding of the challenges we face, to learn about how to better engage members – all members – in the important work of our union, and enjoy our time together. It’s a precious gift to be in an environment focused on the issues of working people. It helps to re-energize ourselves for the work ahead.”

HEU financial secretary Donisa Bernardo chaired the plenary sessions and moderated the member panel on Grassroots Leadership Success Stories.

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“Although at times this work can be frustrating and challenging, it’s important to remember why we continue to do it,” said Bernardo. “It’s because we are committed and passionate about fairness and justice. As activists, you are never alone. You have the support of your fellow activists, and the union always has your back.”

Members participated in several workshops and skills-building exercises, and heard from community experts on grassroots leadership and equity issues.

One highlight was an HEU member panel – featuring Gwenda Alexander (Burnaby local), Precy Miguel (St. Paul’s local), Shawna Lockhart (Kamloops local) and Maria Fe Infante (Vancouver General Hospital local) – who shared success stories and tips on building member mobilization.

Seth Klein, the B.C. director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, discussed the link between politics and the economy, in relation to the labour movement, equity, poverty, and the environment.

“We are now wrestling with the two great inconvenient truths of our time – inequality and climate change,” said Klein, referencing a graph that charts 100 years of wealth distribution. “You see the great [income] inequality in the early years, and again in recent years. But you also see how the shock of WWII jolted a more equitable distribution into place. But it wasn’t just the war; it was also the advance work done, particularly by labour in the 1930s, which lay the groundwork.”

Educator and facilitator Natasha Aruliah, who’s currently doing an extensive equity audit of HEU, spoke about diversity, equity and inclusion.

“Equity is about fairness,” said Aruliah. “It involves accommodating differences and recognizing that some people may face barriers, obstacles or disadvantages due to social inequalities, which require accommodation in order to achieve the same goal, the same outcome. Equity is not the same as equality [as] it is not about treating everyone the same way.”

Boston-based labour strategist and educator Mark Brenner gave several U.S. examples of labour demonstrations that resulted in positive workplace changes. He noted that many employers still use “divide and conquer against us.”

Brenner said, “Our mission as a union is about building power. We are trying to build power for ourselves on the job, for our members, and for working class people in this country and around the world... Our power comes from our internal organization, from our union, and from our willingness to fight.”

Check HEU’s Facebook page for photos, and the next issue of the *Guardian* for more coverage.

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