



HOSPITAL EMPLOYEES' UNION

# NEWSLETTER

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## Labour Day has different meaning for children living in poverty

*A message from HEU secretary-business manager Judy Darcy*

For kids across B.C., Labour Day is better known as the final moment of summer and the beginning of another school year, more books, new teachers, old friends.

But for many, Labour Day also means another year of struggle, watching their parents scramble and sacrifice to pay for things like school supplies, healthy lunches, and field trips.

That's because more than one in five B.C. children lives in poverty, a higher percentage than anywhere else in Canada. It's a shocking statistic, especially in a province that boasts about a strong economy and a multi-billion dollar surplus.

These statistics reinforce the very important call for increased social assistance rates, accessible child care, and more affordable housing. But that alone won't address the crisis of child poverty in B.C.

Why? Because more than half of these children live in families where at least one parent works full-time, for the whole year. In other words, more than half of these children have parents who do not earn a living wage.

From Santa Barbara, California to London, England and in hundreds of cities in between, a growing number of local coalitions are recognizing that the fight to end poverty in our communities includes the fight for a living wage.

The call for a living wage is the call for workers' rights to earn a family-supporting wage. For a wage that allows them to work just one and not two or three jobs to make ends meet. A wage that provides healthy food. And a wage that offers a hopeful future for their children.

But living wages are not just about the health of families. They are also a practical way to improve the health of our schools, our neighbourhoods, and our local economies. Research shows that children who grow up in low-income families are more likely to face challenges in school, and experience job insecurity and poor health as adults. In their submission to the government's *Conversation on Health*, B.C.'s own medical health officers, the doctors responsible for public health in our province, emphasized that child poverty has significant impacts for health care costs and the future of communities throughout B.C.

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But the numbers and experts don't tell the whole story. It's also important to look at the people behind the facts. Let's take "Carmen", for example. She is a single parent who works for a multinational contractor in a Lower Mainland hospital.

Carmen begins her day at 7:00 a.m. as a housekeeper in the emergency ward, where she works until 3:00 p.m., and then changes uniforms and begins her second job preparing and delivering food to patients. She gets home late in the evening, often too tired to do anything more than make food for her son's lunch, and put in a load of laundry before going to bed and starting over again the next day.

Between shifts, Carmen does her best to provide the kind of guidance and support her teenaged son needs. She worries, though, that without more time together, his grades will slip and he will become vulnerable to outside influences like violence and gangs. But Carmen has no choice. At the wage she earns, one job just isn't enough.

And while she tries to save each month for his education, Carmen knows she won't be able to give her son the future she'd hoped for.

Carmen's name is made up, but her story and experiences come from real people. Carmen's life represents the reality for many low-income workers in our communities; workers who deserve a living wage and whose families deserve a living wage.

That's why the Hospital Employees' Union is part of a growing living wage coalition of labour, community, anti-poverty, women's and faith groups, united behind the principle that work should lift you out of poverty, not keep you there.

*More information about the specific campaign to achieve living wages for privatized hospital housekeepers and food service workers is available at [www.bclivingwage.org](http://www.bclivingwage.org).*

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