

HEU support workers launch occupational conference series with enthusiasm and clear focus on bargaining priorities

Job security, seniority, safety and training lead the list of issues support workers identified for the bargaining table

About 60 support workers from across the province gathered at HEU's Provincial Office on September 9 and 10 for the first of five facilities occupational conferences.

During the two-day forum, members spoke about their work, why it's important, what challenges they face, and how their jobs contribute to the health care team and the delivery of quality care to British Columbians. Along with seasoned HEU veterans, there were a number of new activists attending their first-ever union function.

Rhonda Bruce and John Evans, co-chairs of the support workers subcommittee, kicked off the conference, welcoming participants, introducing subcommittee and Provincial Executive (P.E.) members as well as elected union officers – president Ken Robinson and financial secretary Donisa Bernardo – before HEU's secretary-business manager Judy Darcy took the podium.

In her opening remarks, Darcy spoke about the critical role of the occupational conferences in upcoming bargaining talks, and thanked participants for “stepping up to the plate and taking responsibility” to mobilize support workers.

“By being here, you're taking on a leadership role in identifying a short list of bargaining priorities,” says Darcy. “We need to be strategic, focused and creative. I'm not going to sugar-coat anything. I'm going to be brutally honest with you about these challenging times.”

During bargaining discussions, Darcy cited seven major challenges for health care workers, including the recent Lower Mainland consolidation announcement, the BC Liberals' \$360 million budget cut to health authorities, the ongoing reorganization of Shared Services, and government's firm stance on a public-sector wage freeze.

But she also noted factors that are in HEU's favour – the union's *Bill 29* Supreme Court victory which restored our legal right to negotiate on job security, the Campbell government's poor record on privatization and its impact on infection control (such as the C-Difficile outbreak at Nanaimo Regional General Hospital), the mounting public concern about government budget cuts to health care funding, and the vital services HEU members provide to British Columbians every single day.

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Representing food services, security, transportation, shipping/receiving, housekeeping, stores and laundry, conference participants broke into small groups by occupation and also by region to share information, strategize on bargaining, and identify workplace challenges, such as workload, short-staffing, malfunctioning equipment, supply shortages, safety issues, pressure from management and other departments, and computer systems that aren't user-friendly.

Many of the groups emphasized the high level of accuracy, knowledge and education expected in their jobs.



“Getting the right supply or product to the correct location in a timely manner can avoid delaying or cancelling surgeries,” explained one shipper/receiver. “We’re efficient. If we can’t get our jobs done, then there are longer waitlists for patients.”

One housekeeper referred to herself as an infection control technician. “We are not just housekeepers. We are the hospital’s infection control. Cleaners can save lives.”

Adds a food services worker, “We have the nutritional knowledge and education to help patients heal. These aren’t entry-level jobs.”

And a laundry worker reports, “Without sterilized linens, there are no surgeries, no patient admissions. We have skills, but we’re only noticed when we’re needed. When everything is in place, nobody acknowledges the work we’ve done.”

Following informative, and often witty, presentations from participants about their work, Darcy commented that “members’ stories have to get out there. The public, politicians and health employers need to know the vital roles HEU members play in health care, and we need to affirm the importance of the jobs you do every day. And it’s going to take the ‘new energy’ as well as ‘experienced energy’ to get the word out.”

At the end of the conference, support workers identified job security, enhanced seniority rights, stronger health and safety language, and increased training opportunities as bargaining priorities for the P.E. to forward to Wage Policy in November.

HEU president Ken Robinson concluded the session, reminding participants of the importance of solidarity and unity. “We must stay the course and be strong throughout, so that we win respect and the workplace rights that every HEU member deserves.”