

Job security, special adjustments and maintaining benefits top the list of trades and maintenance bargaining priorities

Nearly two dozen HEU trades and maintenance workers from across B.C. attended the union's second occupational conference on September 15 and 16 in Burnaby.

Conference participants – working as cooks, power engineers, electricians, elevator mechanics, plumbers, welders, carpenters, maintenance/groundskeepers and maintenance supervisors – spent the two-day session discussing their work and challenges, identifying a short list of bargaining priorities, and looking at ways to generate support on issues important to their occupational group.

Provincial Executive member Jim Barrett, a tradesman from Lions Gate Hospital, opened the forum with around-the-room introductions, including HEU's president Ken Robinson, financial secretary Donisa Bernardo, and trades and maintenance subcommittee members.



In her opening address, HEU's assistant secretary-business manager and coordinator of servicing Bonnie Pearson spoke about the purpose and history of the occupational conferences, as well as the hurdles health care workers may anticipate in the next round of bargaining.

“Thank you for showing leadership by taking the responsibility to represent your job family as we prepare for bargaining,” said Pearson. “It is important that this conference reflects the priorities of the members you represent here, and that decision-makers know how critical your work is.”

During bargaining discussions, Pearson noted that “these occupational conferences are perhaps more important than last time due to the challenging economic and political climate. The union's leadership is committed to being frank and honest with you. There's no point in sugar-coating anything, we have tough times ahead.”

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Pearson spoke about those challenges, including the ongoing supply chain reorganization, the recent announcement to potentially consolidate 25 services in the Lower Mainland, the BC Liberals' public-sector wage freeze and \$360 million budget cut to health authorities, and most recently, talks of contracting out Tilbury Regional Hospital Laundry and Royal Inland Hospital security services.

Streamlining bargaining priorities

During round-table, large plenary and Q&A sessions, the trades and maintenance participants shared many laughs during presentations about their work – with friendly rivalry between the electrician and power engineer groups – but also rolled up their sleeves for heated debates on serious issues, like streamlining their bargaining priorities, strategizing on ways to promote their work and its direct link to patient care, and building solidarity across the union's occupational lines.

“We're a health care team,” commented one participant. “If one piece of it breaks down, then it all breaks down.”

“No one's job runs without the other being there,” noted an electrician.

“We all work together,” said a plumber. “Our jobs crisscross. And we all have value.”

After three rounds of passionate, facilitated discussions, the trades and maintenance group reached consensus on their bargaining priorities. They include job security with no contracting out and enhanced contracting in (bringing trades jobs back in-house), a policy table for consultation on professional knowledge, maintaining and enhancing special adjustments, and maintaining health and welfare benefits.

These priorities will be forwarded by the Provincial Executive to Wage Policy in November.

Staying united and focused

“It's going to be a tough round of bargaining,” explained Pearson. “But HEU members are the solution. We provide quality work and in return, we have quality jobs. We save the health care system a lot of money by doing our jobs efficiently. We have to protect what we have and make gains where we can. And most importantly, we need to stay united and support each other in the bargaining process.”

In her closing remarks, financial secretary Donisa Bernardo echoed the need for solidarity among HEU's five occupational families. “It takes every HEU member – whether you're on the front lines or behind-the-scenes working together – to deliver quality health care services to British Columbians,” said Bernardo. “And it's important that we stay united and focused, and not let the tactics of health authorities or government deter us from reaching our goals.”

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