

Newsletter

Focus key as wage policy delegates gather in Richmond

On January 9 and 10, more than 300 delegates to HEU's Wage Policy Conference will set in motion a series of events that won't end until nearly 40,000 union members have new collective agreements in their hands.

They've got their work cut out for them.

Fueled by seven highly successful pre-bargaining conferences held in the fall, HEU locals have submitted more than a thousand bargaining proposals for discussion and debate.

Wage policy delegates have just two days to set priorities and provide the focus that's critical for a successful round of collective bargaining in 2006.

And that's not all.

They're also responsible for electing a new bargaining committee that will be charged with hammering out the union's bargaining package and taking it to the negotiating table.

It's a daunting task. But despite the large numbers of wage policy resolutions, there's one theme that clearly dominates – wages.

"Members in every sector are determined to recover lost ground in this round of bargaining," says HEU secretary-business manager Judy Darcy. "Most have taken a direct hit on their pay cheques amounting to hundreds of dollars a month.

"But it's not just members and their families that are hurting," adds Darcy. "Pay rates for many HEU classifications are out of step with comparable public and private sector jobs- and they're not keeping up with expanded responsibilities."

In November, the HEU Provincial Executive provided every local – and every registered wage policy delegate – with a discussion paper to help focus the union bargaining goals on the key issues that arose out of the pre-bargaining conferences.

"The PE's position is that every HEU member deserves a general wage increase – and this relief should not come at the expense of hard-won benefits," says Darcy.

"In addition to a general wage increase, we'll need to negotiate adjustments that address labour shortages and uncompetitive wage rates at the root of a serious retention and recruitment crisis that's putting health care at risk.

"And a new collective agreement needs to recognize the changing roles and expanded responsibilities of our members," adds Darcy. "That means fast-tracking benchmark reviews and negotiating the resources to pay for them."

The PE also identified a number of other issues that need to be addressed at the bargaining table including workload, "whistleblower" protection and disclosure on the true costs of contracting out.

What kind of response can HEU's negotiators expect from the other side of the table?

According to BC finance minister Carole Taylor, her government is looking for a conversation – not a confrontation – with public sector unions.

Taylor says her key goals for public sector bargaining are better recognition of workers and better services for taxpayers, which she says can be achieved if the parties are "creative, and approach new ideas with an open mind."

The finance minister has set aside an extra billion dollars to encourage public sector unions to sign contracts



before March 31.

“I’m glad the minister wants to have a conversation – because our members have lots of ideas about how to improve the services they deliver to British Columbians,” says Darcy. “But this billion dollar dangle could make this a pretty short conversation.

“And it’s another reason for our union to come out of our Wage Policy Conference with focused and clearly defined bargaining objectives.”

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