



HOSPITAL EMPLOYEES' UNION

NEWSLETTER

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Seniors' care workers map out bargaining vision

More than 100 delegates representing HEU members from long-term care and assisted living facilities gathered in Richmond June 5 to 7 to share their experiences and map out a bargaining strategy for a sector rocked by cuts, privatization and contracting out.

The union's Long-term Care Independent Bargaining Conference brought together members who work for sub-contractors, P3 operators and other for-profit and non-profit facilities that are not part of the province-wide Facilities Collective Agreement.

There are currently more than 90 separate collective agreements covering HEU members employed by these facilities.

In her remarks to delegates, HEU secretary-business manager Judy Darcy acknowledged that workers in this sector have paid the price for government's actions over the last 10 years through wage rollbacks, privatization, increased workload and most recently, demands for further rollbacks to pay for increased care hours while protecting profit margins.

"It is morally wrong for these guys to make money hand over fist from the care of seniors," said Darcy. "And we are going to stand up for dignity and respect for our seniors and those who care for them."

One of the highlights of the conference was a presentation from three members who fought hostile employers to protect their contract and improve caring conditions at their worksite.

Nikki Bone from the Hamlets at Westsyde in Kamloops told delegates how members at her worksite overcame an intimidating employer, threats of contracting out, and two decertification attempts to build a stronger local union.

"Today at The Hamlets, we have a local executive that works hard," said Bone.

"We continue to exercise our rights, and we are winning grievances. Members have gained confidence in the union and are slowly bringing issues forward to us. And the employer has failed to get rid of HEU."

Christine Brennan, a care aide at Qualicum Gardens in Parksville, described how her local built community support to face down a threat of contracting flipping by the for-profit operator of the facility.

Members gave their bargaining committee a strong strike mandate and launched a three-week strike that maintained strong support from residents, family members and the community.

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“Collective action made all the difference,” said Brennan. “The owners met and cancelled the contract with the new company just days before the layoff notice period ended.”

Hawthorn Park’s Monte Van Tol told delegates about his local’s fight at the bargaining table in 2005 when their employer was demanding two-tier wages with lower rates for new hires.

Van Tol described how management worked hard to divide the local membership, and the steps the local took to communicate with members – often one-on-one – about the reasons why two-tier wages should be opposed.

The employer’s demand was ultimately defeated (through an arbitration process) and the local emerged united and strong.

“This renewed strength served us well when we went into bargaining again in 2009 – our employer had a change in attitude and approached negotiations much differently,” says Van Tol.

“Our union was with us every step of the way. We were supported. Our confidence increased. We knew the union had our backs. And that’s what solidarity looks like.”

Delegates also heard from new NDP leader Adrian Dix who told them that it was important for health care workers to tell their stories about the impact of cutbacks and privatization on their jobs, their families and on the seniors they look after.

And he encouraged delegates to do all they could to make sure their co-workers and their families participated in the upcoming provincial election.

“We can’t allow another election to go by where 1.4 million British Columbians don’t vote,” said Dix.

During the conference, delegates passed a number of resolutions establishing the union’s broad objectives for bargaining on issues ranging from pensions and benefits to wages and workload to employment security.

Delegates also participated in a number of skills building exercises in the areas of political action, seniors’ advocacy and workload.

But more than anything, delegates learned that they were not alone in their struggles to improve care and protect and improve their jobs. Networking – especially on a regional basis – was an important aspect of the conference.

The Long-term Care Independent Bargaining Conference was held as a result of a decision made by delegates to the 2010 HEU convention to rewrite the union’s constitution so that the union’s bargaining process better reflected the changing reality of the HEU membership.