



Burns Lake HEU members called to action as community responds to tragedy

About two dozen HEU members at Lake District Hospital and Health Centre in Burns Lake were called into urgent action last Friday night when a devastating explosion ripped through the village's Babine Forest Products sawmill around 8:15 p.m., killing two workers and injuring 19 others.

HEU maintenance worker and local vice-chair Blain Cunningham was called back into work at 8:40 p.m., less than half an hour after the blast and subsequent fire that eventually gutted the sawmill. He reported for duty with a heavy heart knowing his brother and son-in-law were both working an evening shift at the mill.

"The hospital called a Code Orange," says Cunningham. "By the time I arrived, which was really fast, there were eight ambulances outside of emergency and all of the injured workers were already inside being treated."

Some patients were transferred to bigger regions like Prince George, with the more critical ones being airlifted to Vancouver and Edmonton with nurses or doctors escorting them.

Cunningham reports that HEU members – including LPNs, care aides, lab assistants, admitting clerks, medical transcriptionists and staff from the CSR, stores, food services, housekeeping, laundry and maintenance departments – were an integral part of the emergency response team, along with RNs, a Native liaison and social workers.

"The people that were here did their job," he said. "They all knew their jobs – management, the paramedics and the nursing team worked together – and everybody was pretty calm. We've had Code Orange practices before, but we've never had to put the plan into action. I was really proud of our HEU members, the nursing staff and doctors – our care aides and LPNs were directly taking care of the patients in the triage and examining rooms. I think it was handled quite impressively."

Cunningham said his brother "is traumatized and having nightmares" from the incident, while his son-in-law remains in a Vanderhoof hospital with second-degree burns. Sadly, one of the fatalities was a relative of Cunningham's wife.

"It's a small community and everybody knows everybody, so this has really affected us. We all have a lot of friends and family members working at the mill."

HEU president Ken Robinson wrote the Burns Lake local commending them for their commitment to patients and offering the union's solidarity.

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“It is acts like these that express the true heart and compassion of health care workers and also highlights how HEU members go above and beyond to assist members, friends and families in our communities,” said Robinson.

As the village’s biggest employer, the tragedy already has dire economic and social consequences as 250 workers immediately lost their jobs. And experts say it would cost between 25 and 100 million dollars to rebuild the sawmill – something the owners and government have not yet committed to do.

Meanwhile, the workers will have to apply for Employment Insurance and play the waiting game while a decision is made about the sawmill’s future.

If you’d like to help, the United Steelworkers (USW) has launched a fundraising campaign to support the sawmill workers and their families.

“At the very heart of the labour movement is the notion of solidarity,” says USW western Canada director Steve Hunt. “It means that when you’re a union member, you’ll never walk alone. And we are sending that message to the workers at Babine Forest Products, to their families and to the community of Burns Lake; we will stand with you, we will support you and you will not have to face this alone.”

Donations to the “USW Burns Lake Fund” can be made in person at any Community Savings Credit Union branch, or by dropping off a sealed envelope containing your cheque at any B.C. credit union (addressed to: Community Savings Credit Union, 5108 Joyce Street, Vancouver B.C. V5R 4H1, Transit #11740), or by mailing a cheque to: Community Savings Credit Union, 5108 Joyce Street, Vancouver, B.C. V5R 4H1, or USW District 3 Office, #300-3920 Norland Avenue, Burnaby, B.C. V5G 4K7).

HEU has donated \$2,500 to the fund and is encouraging locals to send their support as well.

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