



Independent bargaining conference energizes union's support workers

About 75 support services members – representing Compass, Aramark, Sodexo, Acciona and Marquise – gathered at the Sheraton Vancouver Airport Hotel in Richmond for the Health Authorities Support Services Contracted Workers Conference from June 12-14.

Working in acute care hospitals and long-term care facilities throughout the Lower Mainland and Vancouver Island, delegates participated in large plenary and round-table discussions to prioritize their bargaining themes, to learn valuable tools for planning workplace campaigns, and to brainstorm creative ways to deliver their messages.

Conference delegates reached consensus on safe workloads, respect and dignity, and fair compensation as their main themes in this round of bargaining – compiled from data analyzed in a comprehensive bargaining survey of members.

“This conference is a great start,” Susan Fisher, coordinator of organizing and independent bargaining, told delegates. “We have unity on the issues. Now, it’s critical that we begin to build other leaders in our workplaces and mobilize our members to help the employer understand that we intend to win improvements, and also enforce some of the language we already have in our collective agreements.”

Kicking off the first evening’s plenary was a keynote address from BC NDP Leader Adrian Dix, who spoke about the invaluable work support services members provide in the health care system, and reminded delegates of the importance of getting people out to vote in the next provincial election.

Dix also spoke about the need to improve seniors’ care, to defend workers’ rights to collective bargaining, and improve the quality of nutrition for patients in hospital.

HEU’s secretary-business manager Bonnie Pearson set the framework for bargaining in her opening address, giving some historical background on contracting out, reorganizing workers, and negotiating first collective agreements with the private contractors.

She praised delegates for their leadership in advocating for members at their work sites, and spoke of the key role their jobs play in delivering quality health care.

“Our health care system – which is the national pride of this country – cannot function without the people in this room,” said Pearson. “You really are that important, and it’s high time we made your employers acknowledge that fact.”

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Pearson spoke about workers' health and safety challenges; the shortage of resources and supplies in the workplace to adequately do their jobs; and the need for workers in this sector to receive improved wages and benefits.

"We're here this week not just to create a plan for negotiating collective agreements," said Pearson. "We're here to stand up for public health care. To fight back against these multinational companies who are robbing our health system of desperately needed resources. To demand safe working conditions and manageable workloads. To demand the respect and dignity we deserve. And we're here to fight for fair compensation for our work."

Delegates – including those working in food services, housekeeping, laundry, maintenance, stores/receiving, portering and the help desk – also watched a screening of "Dirty Hospitals", produced by CBC's *Marketplace*, which originally aired earlier this spring. The investigative news program, hosted by Erica Johnson, unveils the growing dangers of hospital-acquired infection rates and the link to contracting out and low-staffing levels in housekeeping.

HEU research analyst Lou Black did a presentation on the Living Wage Campaign (LWC), while delegates participated in a fun and enthusiastic performance by the LWC radical cheerleaders.

Under the theme "United for Fairness", conference delegates also received greetings from the union's president Ken Robinson and financial secretary Donisa Bernardo, as well as NDP MLA Shane Simpson.

In her closing remarks, assistant secretary-business manager Jacquie de Aguayo thanked delegates on behalf of the union's leadership and reminded workers of their fundamental right to take collective action.

"One of the things that struck me during this conference is we sometimes forget when we talk about taking action that we have a constitutional right to do this," says de Aguayo. "You have the power, strength and confidence to go out and mobilize members at your workplace, generate support and get a good collective agreement. And I can assure you this union is 100 per cent behind you."

Formerly known as the "Big 3", HEU represents about 4,000 members working for the independent contractors. These members work under four health authorities at 80 health care sites, and are covered by 13 different collective agreements.

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