



Private sector bargaining: Delegates determined to make a difference in their workplaces

More than 130 HEU members gathered together at the Sheraton Airport Hotel in Richmond on February 11 and 12 to participate in the union's second Independent Private Sector Bargaining Conference where they set future priorities and developed campaign strategies to advance their bargaining goals.

Delegates attending came from all across the province, representing more than 90 private sector work sites which included long-term care, assisted living, independent living and addictions support facilities. Employers in the sector include private, for-profit owners; non-profit agencies; and for-profit contract service providers.

Guided by the conference theme "United for Better Care" the two-day event focussed on identifying key challenges affecting working and caring conditions throughout the sector, sharing the successes that have emerged from strong member-led campaigns, and achieving consensus on top priorities for future bargaining and lobbying efforts.

Keynote speaker B.C. Federation of Labour President Irene Lanzinger opened the conference to a warm welcome from conference delegates. She thanked them for their dedicated work, noting that, "Governments and employers don't always recognize the value of the work we do."

Lanzinger also emphasized that the lives of vulnerable residents are impacted by constant contract flipping in seniors' care and the lack of successorship rights for affected workers. "Profits can't come before people in need and those who care for them," she said, pledging to bring the issue forward to government in upcoming lobby meetings with MLAs.

HEU secretary-business manager Bonnie Pearson described the union's four-decade history of advocacy for better seniors' care and how HEU works on a variety of fronts to push back against the political and profit making agendas that undermine workers' rights and quality care.

"First and foremost, I want to emphasize that some of our greatest accomplishments in protecting care in this environment, come from you," she told delegates. "Without you, who are the eyes, the ears, and defenders of care on the front lines, our advocacy efforts at the provincial level would not be as strong."

And she urged delegates to continue to use the tools of their collective agreements to protect the health and safety of workers and residents, to back their bargaining committees with solid campaigns, and when necessary to stand up to contracting out.

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A major outcome of the conference agenda was the adoption of 14 resolutions to guide future bargaining, advocacy, and workplace campaigns. Those resolutions addressed contracting out, fair wages and working conditions, continuity and quality of care, benefit improvements, unsafe work, pensions and building solidarity within the workplace membership.

Featured throughout the two-day event were a series of success stories brought forward by members who described how they had worked together at the local level to achieve gains they had not thought possible.

Other highlights included a panel session on the growing community-wide campaign for a living wage which included Deanna Ogle from A Living Wage for Families, Gail Berger from the Metro Vancouver Alliance, and two of the founding members of HEU's Living Wage Committee, Cora Mojica and Avelina Vasquez.

Of course no conference would be complete without time to let loose and have some fun. Hip hop vocalist and songwriter Ndidi Cascade wowed the first evening's social with a repertoire that brought people to their feet and turned the day's meeting room into an evening dance session.

In addition to delegates, attendees included HEU president Victor Elkins, HEU financial secretary Donisa Bernardo, and the union's Provincial Executive.

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