

Firm No to 'Net Zero' from Social Service Workers

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[The Tyee](#)

Years at bottom of public sector pay built anger, a strike is likely, say union leaders.

By Tom Sandborn, TheTyee.ca

Rally in Victoria last spring: CUPE BC community social service workers sent message of resolve to BC Liberals in May.

Community social services workers earn so little that one out of three "have to take extra jobs to make ends meet, and many of them also have to use food banks," said Cheryl Colborne of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in British Columbia.

"This is no way to run a system," said James Cavalluzzo of the B.C. Government Employees Union (BCGEU).

Colburne, Cavalluzzo and the workers in their unions are mad as hell and aren't going to take it any longer. On Feb. 27, unionized community social service workers in B.C. will wear red to work -- a style statement aimed at the agencies that employ these workers, and to the B.C. government which dictates their wages and contract terms.

The message is that these workers, who have lived with a wage freeze for several years and are the lowest paid public employees in the province, are not willing to sign a "net zero" contract again this time.

If the message is ignored, they are almost certain to strike.

'Time to address inequalities'

With backing from the BC Federation of Labour and affiliated unions, leaders in the community social service sector unions say this is the year for their members to catch up after years of cut backs, freezes and broken promises.

Unionized workers in this sector deliver services that range from shelters for battered women to child care centres to information and referral hot lines to group homes for developmentally challenged adults and counseling services for the addicted at 220 agencies across the province. March is Community Social Services Month in B.C.

Union leaders told The Tyee there will be a real risk of a strike in the sector if the group that bargains for unionized agencies, the Community Social Services Employers' Association insists on adhering to the current government policy that any contract gains must be funded by savings and efficiencies found within the limits of current funding. This approach has been billed as "co-operative gains" by the BC Liberal government and by union critics as the same old "net zero" approach from the last contract, an approach they say their memberships have rejected this time.

"We've surveyed our members," Michael Lanier, president of CUPE local 1936, which represents community social service workers in the Vancouver area, told the Tyee, "and they are adamant. They really need to see some improvement this time. With inflation factored in, members have lost real income during the last contract. We won't be accepting zeroes this time. We had an 83 per cent strike vote last time and I expect it will be even stronger this time. Other unions are on our side on this. It is time to address inequalities."

"Job action is a very real possibility," said the BCGEU's Cavalluzzo, who chairs the joint union bargaining committee that will begin talks with the employer on Feb. 27. "Without a doubt, wages and benefits are the main issues. We have had a clear, overwhelming message

from our members. We've had three years of zeroes and we are already the worst paid workers in public service."

Cavalluzzo echoed what CUPE officer Colborne told the Tye. Like her, he knows of many members who work in the community sector who have to take second jobs to make ends meet, and he has heard stories about members working full time and still needing to visit the food bank at the end of the month. Pamela Pye, a life skills worker with developmentally challenged individuals and an officer of her BCGEU local, also sees her fellow workers holding down two and sometimes even three jobs.

"I see them leaving work at 3:00 and rushing off to another shift starting at 3:30 somewhere else," Pye told the Tye. "You can forget about home life when you work like that."

Seeking more sick leave

Improving a contract that sees some members paid well below the recognized minimum living wage for families in B.C. is a primary goal for union bargainers in the community social services sector, but there is also a considerable appetite on the union side of the table for improvements in benefits, especially sick leave arrangements.

"In 2004," Cavalluzzo told the Tye, "sick leave provisions in our contract were reduced. Where before that contract a worker was entitled to 18 days of annual sick leave at full pay, since then that provision has been cut back to only 12 days a year, and sick pay is only 80 per cent of full pay."

Combine the reduced access to sick time and pay with low wages and you have a recipe for people feeling impelled to come to work sick because they simply cannot afford to stay home, a number of union sources told The Tye. This in turn can represent real increased risk for clients living with compromised immune systems or other medical vulnerabilities.

There are some 60,000 community social service workers in B.C. About 15,000 are union members. The BCGEU represents two-thirds

of them and CUPE BC another 2,500. The rest are members of the Hospital Employees' Union, the Health Sciences Association (HSA) of British Columbia, the United Steelworkers of America, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, the Construction and Specialized Workers' Union, the Christian Labour Association of Canada and the British Columbia Nurses' Union.

Previous strike won gains then rolled back

B.C.'s community social service workers conducted a 12-week strike in 1999, a job action that led to real gains for many unionized workers. The agreement included government commitments to bring workers in the sector up to wage parity with health care workers doing similar work in the future. According to the BCGEU's Cavalluzzo, promises that have yet to be kept.

Currently, according both to union and employer sources, wages in the community sector can run from 10 to 30 per cent lower than what the government pays workers in the health sector.

Some of the 1999 wage gains were unilaterally revoked by the Liberal government in 2004, CUPE's Lanier told *The Tyee*. "Some workers saw the hourly rate of \$16.32 they won in 1999 rolled back to \$13.50 an hour," he said.

Low wages tied to 'women's work' perception

Like many other union leaders and members who spoke to *The Tyee* for this story, Lanier suggested that one of the reasons that workers in his sector are paid so poorly is that they do nurturing and care taking tasks that have traditionally been seen as "women's work." With that in mind, Lanier and other B.C. trade unionists have been celebrating a recent tribunal order issued in Australia that will mandate pay increases for community social service workers there by from 40 to 65 per cent over the next eight years in order to address gender-based pay inequality.

They told The Tyee they would like to see the same principles of gender equality and equal pay for work of equal value applied to their bargaining process with the B.C. government.

The head of the employers' association for unionized community social service agencies in B.C., Gentil Mateus, was one who confirmed to The Tyee the wage disparities between those paid in his sector and what workers with similar training make in the health care sector. He's in a position to know, as he has just moved over to his position with CSSEA from a similar employers' group in the health care sector in the last six months.

"The 'co-operative gains' mandate will be very difficult to apply to this sector," he said. "The community social services have been doing a lot with little already. It will be difficult to fund raises and benefit improvements from new economies. A lot of savings have already been found in this sector. You can only squeeze a lemon so far."

The provincial government spent \$596 million on community social services last year, Mateus said, and each one per cent increase in wages and wage-related benefits negotiated would cost the government \$5.6 million. He said he had hopes that some savings can be found by reducing work-related injuries and long-term disability pay-outs for ill and injured workers. He said the sector's employers paid out \$13 million last year in long-term disability payments.

Peter Cameron, who will be the lead employer-side negotiator in the community Social service sector talks, confirmed that his mandate does not allow for any increase in global costs. All new wages or benefits, he said, would have to come by finding efficiencies in order to fund "modest increases."

'Stuck for a long time'

Anne Davis, a program co-ordinator at the Comox Valley Transition Society and HSA member, says the approach Cameron has been directed to take will be "really frustrating" in her sector.

"We've been stuck for a long time," she said. She told The Tyee that

after 20 years at her very responsible job, and nearly at the top of the pay grid, she was making the same hourly wage as a young family member who had just taken a job as a care aid in a rest home.

"We are looking for some respect and fairness in these negotiations," she said. "We want wage parity with the health sector and we want our sick pay provisions restored."

Where would government get the money to meet those targets? The BC Liberals say the public purse is empty and it would be irresponsible to grant any wage gains in the current unstable economic climate.

Union leaders say it's a matter of priorities. They say the government has found money for tax breaks on vacation homes, stadium roofs, TV ads that verge on political propaganda and Olympic celebrations. It's time, they told The Tyee, for some of that money to flow to people who do vital and under-recognized social service work in the community.

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