

Growing up on the picket lines

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Val Avery was re-elected president of HSA by delegates attending convention in May. In her remarks just prior to balloting, she spoke of how her roots in the labour movement fuel her determination to fight for the future of HSA members. The full text of her speech follows.

My community for the first 18 years of my life was located in HSA's Region 1, the city of Port Alberni. During the years I was growing up there it had the largest mill complex in the world for the production of pulp, paper and lumber. Freighters and barges would come and go from our port, moving these products to the rest of the world. My dad worked at that port; he was a longshoreman and a proud member of ILWU.

It was a highly unionized community. I know that one of the first words in my vocabulary was "strike", because they were frequent, long and often nasty. And, for my family with five kids, they made for stressful times, trying to meet our needs on "strike pay".

I have very vivid pictures that remain in my mind of men on picket lines. That was the way it was in those times, new collective agreements were rarely achieved without a strike.

As an adult I've walked my share of picket lines on sidewalks around hospitals. I supported and encouraged my colleagues to walk an illegal picket line when this Liberal government was first elected, while they were sitting

in the house passing legislation to impose a collective agreement upon us. For my actions I had a letter of discipline on my personnel file for two years.

These days governments regularly use legislation and the courts as weapons to control organized workers. In response, unions need to switch their thinking from every round of bargaining needing a full-scale fight in the form of a strike, to more strategic methods of applying pressure on employers that avoid negative consequences for their members.

Yes, every member in this room will agree that wage increases in the last few rounds of bargaining haven't met members expectations, but we have achieved things that other workers can only dream of. Most of us have a jointly-trusted defined benefit pension plan that is not only a model of success in Canada but internationally. For you that means a paycheque for life. Yesterday you heard Hassan Yussuff, president of the CLC, tell you the statistics for how few people in this country have a pension plan, let alone a defined benefit plan. We are privileged.

And, in the last round of HSPBA bargaining we managed to wrestle the administration of our health and welfare benefits, which our members so value, out of the hands of government and create a jointly trusted benefit trust plan, similar to our pension plan.

HSA is the union that has the ability to do great things. Our membership is comprised of highly educated, thoughtful, and articulate professionals. With the support and expertise of our staff we can take on challenges and we can be successful.

The position of President is a political position and I'm happy to have been called a politician. I'm not afraid to defend members rights, to engage and challenge the Ministers of Health, Children and Families, Social Development, or any other minister. If that's what needs to be done then I'll damn well do it. It's the work I have been doing in the past year and pledge to continue to do.

I've told you how I respect the work you do; how I believe in you and your desire to build a strong union.

Now, I ask you to believe in me, that I am the candidate of choice to lead us into the future and achieve some of the changes you are looking for.

I respectfully ask for your vote.

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