

Bargaining for equity: Low-wage earners win redress in BC health and social services

CUPE bargaining teams won a major victory for equity in British Columbia this summer. BC Community Health (CBA) and Community Social Service (CSS) ratified deals that included \$40 million and \$60 million respectively in funding for low-wage redress.

Redress is about justice for workers who have been systematically undervalued. In this case, the funds will be targeted at the lowest earners and will go a long way in reducing long-term inequalities in compensation in social services and health care. This redress funding is in addition to the two per cent annual general wage increase achieved in each year of the three-year collective agreement!

The Community Health Bargaining Association represents 16,000 workers in BC, of whom approximately 2000 are CUPE members. The Community Social Services Bargaining Association represents 15,000 workers, around 4,350 of whom belong to CUPE. (The CUPE membership figures include members from the Hospital Employees' Union, or HEU, a CUPE service division).

The provision of health care in our communities outside of traditional hospital settings is increasing. As this trend continues, it is important that we

recognize the equal value of health and social services work that is done outside of hospitals. Achievements like low-wage redress are key to ensuring that jobs in health and elder care are attractive and decent jobs as our society changes the way it delivers health care.

This significant funding for low-wage redress is also an important step forward towards pay equity in BC. Currently, the average woman working a full-time,

full-year job in Canada earns 74 per cent what an average man earns. This gap has remained relatively stable over the last 10 years. This can be partially explained by the fact that female workers are concentrated in industries and occupations with traditional gender roles. In order to reduce the gender-pay-gap, the systematic undervaluation of traditionally women's work needs to be addressed.

In Canada, women make up over 80 per cent of the workers in health care and social services. In BC, the community health and social services sectors are among the lowest-paid public sector workers in the province. For example, a Community Health Worker and Awake Residential Night Worker both earn less than \$19 per hour. These wages are not enough to keep up with the cost of living in BC, especially for part-time workers.

All workers deserve decent compensation that keeps up with the cost of living. As we celebrate this victory for CUPE members in BC, we will continue to advocate for our lowest-earning members whose work continues to be significantly undervalued.

■ **Sarah St John**



INSIDE

2 Bargaining Forward in New Brunswick: Coordinating to Win

3 Surveys highlight need to bargain against precarious employment in library sector

4 Clear and detailed language helps protect negotiated benefits

Bargaining Forward in New Brunswick: Coordinating to Win



CUPE members “bargain forward” in Moncton. Photo: Brien Watson

Something special is happening at provincial bargaining tables in New Brunswick. Since March 2018, provincial groups have been pushing to make gains on the exact same priority: real wage increases. As negotiations continue, sustaining the pressure on the Government of New Brunswick has required strategic coordination at all levels of CUPE across the province.

The *Breaking the Mandate: Bargaining Forward* campaign defines coordinated bargaining as bargaining in which multiple locals negotiate simultaneously and won't settle until everyone is ready to accept similar terms. It includes presenting the same or similar bargaining proposals to convey the solidarity and unity of locals.

At the table, coordinated bargaining has allowed CUPE staff representatives to deliver the same message on the first day of negotiations across the province, highlighting the drop in real wages and arguing for the need to make up for lost ground. They used CUPE's real wage calculator to help prepare proposals. With coordinated bargaining, information flows steadily between provincial tables, so bargaining styles can be adapted to employer proposals that shift from one table to the next.

Membership engagement has been key to gathering and maintaining the strength necessary to make real wage gains at the table. We're doing that with two complementary engagement processes: face-to-face organizing and social media campaigns.

Regional Action Committees (RACs) were first created by CUPE New Brunswick as mobilization committees prior to the 1992 province-wide strike. The committees group CUPE locals by region, have elected co-chairs and are places where CUPE members gather and share cross-sectoral information and organize events.

RACs have been very active since the launch of the campaign. Co-chairs, staff and CUPE NB Executive members co-facilitated membership training sessions on coordinated bargaining and membership engagement in all 12 regions of the province. In Saint John, over 150 members showed up to the first session – on a Saturday morning! Over the summer, the RACs organized family-friendly and free community events called “CUPE Gives Back.” RAC members also attended other events to leaflet and educate the public about the need for real wage increases.

CUPE New Brunswick has also used Facebook to engage members in the campaign and share their stories and experiences through shareable images. Members took pictures with “Breaking the Mandate” posters to win prizes, which resulted in more materials being displayed in workplaces.

Community buzz and member support are providing real clout for our negotiators at the bargaining table.

The Government of New Brunswick is treading very carefully, and as the movement keeps growing, real wage increases are within our reach.

■ **Gabrielle Ross-Marquette**

Tabletalk is published four times a year to provide CUPE bargaining committees and servicing representatives with useful information for preparing and negotiating bargaining demands.

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CUPE / Canadian Union
of Public Employees

Surveys highlight need to bargain against precarious employment in library sector



Precarious employment in the library sector is a major challenge for union bargaining teams, according to two new CUPE surveys of library workers across the country.

Precarious work may be part-time, temporary, casual or contract work. It provides fewer full-time, permanent hours of work and fewer, if any, employment benefits like access to extended health insurance benefits or pension plans. Precarity is a challenge for union negotiators – and for social justice, because it adds to the growing divide between rich and poor and puts further stress on public services.

CUPE's 2014 national membership survey found that permanent, part-time employment is highest among public library workers. These results prompted delegates to CUPE's 2015 National Convention to adopt a resolution which directed the union to conduct a multi-year, in-depth survey on precarious employment with CUPE library workers across the country.

The surveys found that levels of precarity are similar across the different kinds of libraries. Fifty-two per cent of stand-alone public library workers report

they're either precariously employed or at risk of falling into precarious employment. Fifty-four per cent of members responded similarly in municipal, university and school board libraries.

Phases 1 and 2 findings are also similar in terms of the characteristics of library workers who are precariously employed.

The surveys found that:

- Precarity tends to decrease with age
- Precarity tends to decrease as income increases
- There are geographic differences in the experience of precarious employment with precarity more prevalent in the west
- Library workers who are precariously employed tend to work less than full-time hours, earn less than \$40,000 per year, have more than one job, and work as library clerks, assistants, or pages; and
- Precariously employed library workers tend to work in municipal libraries and be in locals of 500 to 999 members.

The survey findings also revealed that precarity is a human rights issue. Precariously employed library workers tend to be women; gay, lesbian, queer, or bisexual; have a disability; and be Indigenous or racialized. The findings also show that library workers who are precariously

SURVEY DETAILS

Phase 1 of the survey project consisted of a national random telephone survey of CUPE library workers who work in stand-alone public libraries (libraries that have their own CUPE local that is not part of another local, and that has its own collective agreement). CUPE represents 119 stand-alone public library bargaining units across Canada. Of that number, members of 71 bargaining units participated in the survey representing 60 per cent of all stand-alone bargaining units. A total of 805 CUPE public library workers participated.

Phase 2 consisted of an online survey of library workers that work in municipal, university, and school board libraries. The same survey questions were posed in Phases 1 and 2. Coincidentally, 805 library workers responded to the online survey, the same number that responded to the telephone survey in Phase 1. Twenty per cent of these members work in university libraries, 29 per cent work in municipal libraries, 44 per cent work in school board libraries, and six per cent work for provincial library or regional library systems.

employed tend not to be active in their local unions. This highlights the need for more vigorous member engagement strategies, something that was identified in the findings of CUPE's 2016 National Leadership Survey.

Continued on page 4

Precarious employment in library sector *continued from page 3*

The survey project also uncovers several more key findings that bargaining committees will want to consider. The results from both surveys reveal, not surprisingly, that most library workers are women: 79 per cent of library workers identified as women in Phase 1 compared to 85 per cent in Phase 2.

Further, public stand-alone library workers work more permanent part-time hours and fewer permanent full-time hours compared to the entire CUPE membership. By contrast, the findings from Phase 2 show the opposite is true with municipal, university, and school

board library workers who report more permanent full-time hours and fewer permanent part-time hours of work.

Many part-time library workers are seeking full-time work, but the wait can be long. Forty-one per cent of part-time library workers who participated in Phase 2 are actively looking for full-time work compared to 31 per cent in Phase 1. Twice as many library workers in Phase 2 have been looking for full-time employment for 5+ years compared to Phase 1. Overall, the findings tell us that it can take several years to secure full-time library employment. In

Phase 1, 63 per cent of public library workers waited up to 10 years to find full-time work; by comparison, the percentage in Phase 2 is 55 per cent.

The surveys clearly demonstrate the challenges facing union negotiators in the library sector. Libraries are vital community hubs and places where all people can acquire knowledge and access information. This makes the fight against precarious work in the library sector a major priority for CUPE bargaining teams – and the union as a whole.

Read the full survey results at cupe.ca

■ **Joseph Leonard-Boland**

Clear and detailed language helps protect negotiated benefits

Reviewing contract language can help locals safeguard the benefits they have worked hard to gain.

Negotiated benefits cover a wide range of areas including health, dental, accidental death and dismemberment, and travel and life insurance. Details can be wide-ranging, including plan design and structure, premiums and administration. Many collective agreements state that employees will be enrolled in a health and dental plan or that they will receive benefits from a provider. Language like this requires an employer to make benefits available.

In some cases, benefits negotiated during bargaining are administered on behalf of the employer by one or more third-party service providers. In these circumstances, it is important to have clear and detailed language in your collective agreement to hold the employer accountable. Relying on a third-party provider to implement benefits without a clear list of what's covered can leave your members vulnerable or lead to confusion about members' entitlements.

For example, a collective agreement might provide for a dental plan but might not state what specific procedures are covered. The specific plan design could be determined by the employer and service provider – and it could change over time. To protect your members, include an itemized list of benefits in your collective agreement to ensure that what you have agreed to is actually provided.

Think about the way CUPE locals negotiate earnings: Collective agreements state specific details about wages and usually include the rate of compensation and frequency of payments. It would be unreasonable to agree to compensation language that merely said employers will “pay employees.” It would also be unreasonable to agree to benefit language that simply says an employer will provide a benefit plan.

Benefit plans can be complex and can include a range of different coverages. CUPE recommends that locals include specific language about the plan, eligibility and costs in the contract's articles. Also, attach a summary of

benefits. This approach ensures your benefits are well-documented and limits an employer's ability to arbitrarily change them. It also makes the employer responsible for providing specific coverage and allows you to point to a list of benefits in case of disagreement.

What your local can do:

- Review your current collective agreement(s)
- Identify any language that relates to benefits
- Make sure the language clearly outlines the benefits provided

Remember, if someone who was unfamiliar with your benefits read the collective agreement, would they know what was covered? If not, consider preparing new language to propose in bargaining.

CUPE is here to help. For more support, connect with your CUPE staff representative. Find sample bargaining language at cupe.ca/bargaining-benefits-collective-agreement-language

■ **Toby Whitfield**