

## **Regional Directors Report – 2022 CUPE BC Convention**

In the many months since our last Division convention, CUPE members and staff have risen to the numerous challenges presented by a seemingly endless cycle of crises. In addition to responding to the ongoing and evolving COVID-19 pandemic, we faced back-to-back climate emergencies, from record breaking temperatures during the 2021 heat dome and widespread wildfires across the province, to catastrophic flooding in the fall. We faced the public health pressures and tragedy associated with the toxic drug supply and overdose crisis. CUPE members have faced all these challenges head on, showing tremendous strength, resilience, and commitment to their communities throughout. And, despite the adversity faced, CUPE National Staff and CUPE locals, together with CUPE BC, have stood together to protect and support our members through some of their darkest days. The past year has taught us many lessons: that public services are vital, that frontline workers are heroes, and that—when communities and livelihoods are threatened—it is often the people who are paid the least that end up doing the most to keep our communities safe.

We saw this in the Fraser Canyon community of Lytton, where our members were among those who lost their homes and their jobs as a wildfire ripped through their community. CUPE mobilized its resources through the Division as servicing staff and locals worked to ensure that those in shelters and other evacuees had access to emergency hardship funds. Members worked day and night to help their neighbours, despite suffering themselves. To those who lost everything over the course of a few minutes, our hearts and hands are with you as you rebuild. We also saw this spirit of sacrifice in Abbotsford, Merritt, and other communities devastated by the floods. Despite the logistical challenges of the recovery effort—with roads and train tracks either washed away by mudslides or submerged, and pumping stations pushed to the breaking point—CUPE members in municipalities worked around the clock to ensure that critical infrastructure functioned, that community members were evacuated safely and that emergency operation centres had the most up to date information. In some cases, while our members worked around the clock to keep key infrastructure going, their families were evacuating their own homes, and were sheltering in neighbouring communities or civic centres. We are deeply grateful to you, for your selfless efforts on others' behalf. We salute you.

Provincially and locally, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to cause workplace and societal disruptions as 2022 began. Public health measures and closures put in place to protect the community had impacts on our members, often causing the most harm to workers already precariously employed in casual or auxiliary positions. Until the province moved in March to ease restrictions, we continued to vigilantly monitor pandemic-related employer policies, to ensure that they were fair and did not unduly displace workers from their jobs where sensible alternatives existed. With the support of the union's leadership, CUPE National staff assisted locals in challenging unfair employer policies through their grievance process. Now, as we move into a more manageable phase of the pandemic, we will continue to take the lessons we've learned and keep building the British Columbia we want: a B.C. that invests in public services and public infrastructure, that supports good jobs and a strong health care system, that is committed to public and universal child care through our public schools, and that puts the priorities of working people first.

## Provincial Overview

Since 2017, CUPE members and working families in B.C. have enjoyed the benefits of having a progressive provincial government in Victoria—including the obvious benefit of not having to face wage freezes or rollbacks. Thanks to a spirit of consultation that has allowed us to work collaboratively with the BC NDP government on many issues, CUPE members have also enjoyed wins on key issues while being further protected during the COVID-19 pandemic by a government that puts workplace safety in front of cost-cutting austerity. However, in pursuing the kind of changes that have the most positive impact on our members and their workplaces, we know there is much more work to be done. While we are grateful that CUPE members in this province are no longer getting hammered by a BC Liberal government—unlike our fellow members in provinces ruled by similarly right-wing parties—there is increasing urgency in our fight for progressive change, a sense that we need to achieve our goals while the BC NDP has a strong mandate and an even stronger majority government.

This BC NDP government has made several positive changes to the BC Labour Code, and we are hopeful that recent discussion around re-introducing card check certification means we are on the verge of reversing a cornerstone of past BC Liberal governments' anti-labour policy. One of the labour movement's bedrock principles, card check helps workers claim their rights by making union certification straightforward; it helps to rebuild the power of workers and our right to organize. Similarly, the first round of changes to the Employment Standards Act were excellent, but without an increase in funding, the Employment Standards branch cannot hire adequate staff to make those changes meaningful and to reduce delays workers face in having complaints heard. The pandemic demonstrated to us the importance of access to paid sick leave as a protection for workers. Effective January 1, 2022, the provincial government amended the Employment Standards Act to create a minimum of 5 days paid sick leave for workers. While we were very happy to see this move, which should have meant that workers would not have to choose between coming to work sick and losing pay. However, the way the legislation was drafted resulted in many thousands of casual, auxiliary, temporary or part time CUPE members and unionized workers in BC not having access to this minimum entitlement because collective agreements just had to "meet or exceed" 5 days paid sick leave when examined as a whole. This meant that collective agreements that provided for 5 days or more of paid sick leave for a majority of members were sufficient, even though some members had no sick leave at all. Through CUPE BC and CUPE staff's coordination among CUPE locals, other unions, and the BC Federation of Labour, and through our lobby efforts, we brought this issue to government and an amendment was passed earlier this month to fix this issue, extending paid sick leave to all workers in the province.

As we plan for the political action ahead, we must also consider that our recent victories and the potential for further changes have only been possible because we have a BC NDP government. A progressive majority government means we can effectively use our resources to expand workers' rights, to gain ground for working people in British Columbia, and not to simply fight successive waves of concessions and union-bashing policies as we did for 16 years under the BC Liberals. The gains workers have made in the short time since we elected the NDP have been substantial, even though constrained initially by the political restrictions of minority government, and subsequently the fallout from a once-in-a-generation pandemic. As part of our work moving forward, we must re-commit ourselves to

ensuring that progressive decision-makers remain in Victoria, and plan to again defeat the BC Liberals in the next election.

Thankfully, the work of CUPE's B.C. division and our excellent relationship with Karen and Trevor have had a huge impact on our union's ability not only to engage with the provincial government but also to keep applying pressure for progressive change. Structures like the Strong Communities Working Group connect the Division's work to senior staff and specialists: thanks to the diligence of our legislative coordinator, researchers, and lawyers, we've been able to provide CUPE's perspective to government through consultation and with presentations to numerous panels. This cooperation, unique to B.C., continues to benefit our members and grow our strength as a union.

### **Protecting Public Services**

The pandemic reduced or shut down many public services at a time when the demand for access to those services was more critical than ever. We had to work hard to ensure that vital public services—such as municipal, recreational, library and education—were protected and reopened in a safe manner. Standing up to employers who were keeping public services closed for cost-saving reasons became crucial, and we engaged the public in awareness campaigns while putting pressure on local and provincial governments to keep our public services open and available. The funding challenge has been different in the transit sector, where revenues are dependent on passenger volumes. Although significant service cuts and layoffs were avoided in the first two years of the pandemic due to federal relief dollars, a \$200 million hole in operating revenue shortages is forecast for this year and 2023. In February, the federal government announced another one-time cash infusion to help cities across Canada make up for shortfalls in transit revenues linked to COVID-19. Whether Translink's share of new \$750 million in federal funding will be enough to correct the shortfall, and whether the BC government can provide the necessary matching funds, remains to be seen. In the meantime, our members at CUPE 7000 (SkyTrain) and CUPE 4500 (Coast Mountain Bus Company) will continue to highlight the importance of public transportation and resist reductions in service.

CUPE's efforts during local government elections and by-elections have, for the most part, effectively resisted the push for lower taxes and contracted-out services driven by conservative groups. Some exceptions remain, pointing to where future political action work will be necessary. Our largest project continues to be our work against mass privatization in the childcare sector. With new provincial and federal funding being made available to school districts, municipalities, and other agencies for childcare spaces in B.C., and a provincial commitment to re-envision childcare as a core public service, we are campaigning hard to ensure that these services are publicly delivered. It is imperative that we curb private corporations from profiting off the care of our children; that we prevent them from funneling public funds into private profits.

This past year has been all about campaigns that highlight the critical work our members do to support the community and the economy and how that work has been impacted by COVID-19. Our health care workers and paramedics have been on the front lines, risking their own health to ensure that others receive the care they need. The pandemic also brought the work of our 9-1-1 operators and dispatchers into the spotlight over the past year, particularly as the extreme weather events had historic impacts on all first responders.

In addition to a public campaign highlighting the work of our members at CUPE 8911 (Emergency Communications Professionals of BC), our staff team and the Local, in consultation with E-Comm, launched an unprecedented lobbying effort that targeted municipal politicians to secure proper funding and achieve a more sustainable funding model.

Our staff, CUPE members and the Division have worked tirelessly to ensure that our members' work has been protected during layoffs and that employer policies related to the pandemic have been implemented with fairness and human rights at the forefront. Our legal team has ensured that staff and locals have the tools they need to protect our members from unreasonable employer policies while still protecting the safety of our members at work.

### **Collective Bargaining**

Since the BC NDP government first took power in 2017, we've seen real gains for our members in provincial sector bargaining. The government set the tone with a wage mandate that didn't start with concessions, and they agreed in principle to provide wage and benefit improvements, as well as low-wage redress, for provincially funded sectors. In 2022, all our provincially funded sectors are either currently in bargaining or heading into it. Contract talks are taking place in an economic climate of rising costs and inflation in which more and more workers are struggling to meet their basic needs. We know that many of our members across the province are food- and housing-insecure, so we need to keep this in mind at the bargaining table; we need to ensure that our efforts are focussed on protecting the provisions that make CUPE jobs good jobs while also ensuring that wages do not fall behind the cost of living.

With all the challenges the past two years have thrown at us, it is important to remember that a harm to one is a harm to all: we must work harder, and smarter, to protect all workers covered by our collective agreements and bring up the floor for all workers. To that end, CUPE staff will continue to provide the resources that CUPE locals need every day. At the same time, we understand that the provincial government is facing challenges balancing its commitment to leave no worker behind with the reality of a treasury and economy that have been profoundly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of natural disasters, and the growing costs of an unpredictable climate. The public sector and its workers are a solution to these challenges, and solutions starts with fair collective agreements that enable workers and families to contribute to the better B.C. we want today, and for future generations.

In preparation for this year's bargaining, the regional director and assistant regional directors have called for an all-hands-on-deck approach in which specialists and coordinators work closely with servicing representatives and bargaining committees to ensure that every local and every sector has the tools they need to have a successful round of bargaining. These sector coordinating teams will strengthen our bargaining power by building on our behind-the-scenes capacity, allowing us to withstand the assault of employers' coordinated bargaining practices. Looking back, it is easy to see the value of the National Bargaining Policy and the effectiveness of strategic planning in mobilizing all our resources during this period. Now, more than ever, we need to continue working in solidarity with those sectors that have experienced the most significant impacts of the pandemic.

## **Organizing**

As a result of our organizing efforts, we continue to welcome new members to CUPE. Our organizing team rose to the new challenges brought on by the pandemic: with in-person organizing becoming a thing of the past, we took our campaigns online. COVID-19 realities also meant that we needed some changes at the Labour Board, so we fought for and gained the right to use electronic membership cards. From the addition of new units, organic growth, and a commitment to wall-to-wall organizing, we arrived in 2022 well prepared to take on the challenge of organizing in the childcare sector through K-12 while continuing to grow in our traditional sectors of municipalities, libraries, and the post-secondary education sector.

## **Conclusion**

In 2022, CUPE National funded two new permanent staff representative positions, one at the Victoria Area office and one at the B.C. Regional Office in Burnaby. These positions will help us keep up with servicing the growing membership in B.C. While some unions laid off staff during the pandemic, CUPE kept staff on the job and available to help locals and members get through this challenging time. For our National staff, this has been a very difficult two years. Their dedication and commitment have been inspiring, they showed true grit and resilience in serving our members while adapting to pandemic working conditions amid natural disasters. To all CUPE National staff in B.C., I offer my sincere gratitude.

In solidarity,

Ann Lennarson  
Regional Director

cope491