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Op-Eds

#HotStrikeSummer could be the start of a new relationship between workers and employers

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This wildfire season has seen a huge effort by countless thousands of workers to keep communities, homes and families safe: fighting fires, supporting evacuations, caring for people and rebuilding in the aftermath.

It's been one more reminder of how central working people are to every aspect of life in BC. Which is why this season also saw a different kind of heat: rising labour unrest. Dubbed "#HotStrikeSummer" on Twitter, it's actually been going on for much longer — for instance, with the spring's provincial public-sector strikes.

And while many of the summer's strikes have been settled, this new era of worker activism isn't going to end any time soon. More contracts are coming up for negotiation; and workers in more and more workplaces are organizing.

“There's a new reality in BC: Employers can no longer count on having the upper hand, and workers aren't prepared to cede it to them.”

Partly that's a response to seeing our standards of living eroded by spikes in inflation. As many economists point out, those increases were driven not by wage increases but by supply chain disruptions and surging corporate profits.

Yet the expectation workers keep hearing is that we'll just absorb it. Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Mackle has encouraged employers not to price inflation into wage increases, and implied that he wants unemployment to rise so inflation can fall.

To working people, that refrain sounds awfully familiar. When businesses respond to cost pressures by charging more, that's economics; but when workers do the same with the cost of their labour, that's inflationary. Instead, we're supposed to swallow the impact without complaint, and watch as the real value of our wages shrinks.

This time, though, it isn't that easy. If you're a worker, you can remember corporations and governments alike hailing you as pandemic heroes just three years ago. And after decades of seeing wealth concentrate into fewer and fewer hands, the people whose hands actually create that wealth aren't willing to see our standards of living shrink any further.

There's one other change in the landscape that's left some employers perplexed: their difficulty in hiring. And while demographic changes in the workforce have something to do with that, an even bigger issue is simply this: People just aren't as willing to accept jobs with poor working conditions, paying wages that don't allow them to live and raise families in the towns and cities they work in. That's a commentary on the low wages too many jobs pay, but it also reflects the cost of living — especially housing — in our communities.

There is a new reality in BC and many other places today: Employers can no longer count on having the upper hand, and workers aren't prepared to cede it to them. And that has opened up possibilities for working people to make important advances — not just in unionized workplaces, but throughout BC. It's why we're taking on issues from pay equity to full employment standards protection for app-based gig workers.

What we'd like more employers to realize is that this is an opportunity for them, too.

The shocks of the past four years — the pandemic, climate disasters and supply chain disruptions, among others — show the fundamental weakness of trying to build prosperity with a zero-sum mindset. The belief that for employers to win, workers must lose just doesn't work today (if it ever did); massive challenges require large-scale, coordinated solutions. That's true whether we're talking about short-term crises or the long-term transformations needed to address climate change and technological advancements.

The economies that succeed are going to be the ones that have everyone pulling together. They'll be the ones where employers make room for workers in helping to shape their own futures in adapting to automation and AI. They'll be the ones where the working people and communities most affected by change lead the work of ensuring everyone benefits, and nobody is left behind. And they'll be the economies where living wages come together with affordability to ensure workers and businesses alike can create a future together in every community in BC.

This moment is an opportunity for employers of all kinds to build new, more durable relationships with workers and the unions that represent them. That's how we create a more resilient economy and a stronger, fairer province.

This Labour Day, let's commit to starting to build that partnership now.