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Op-Eds

Laird Cronk: From banging pots and pans: Let’s build a future that delivers more for all working people

Tonight at 7 p.m., in communities all over our province, British Columbians will step out of their homes. For just a few minutes, we’ll bang pots and pans, sing and cheer in a show of support and respect for workers on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Together, we’re shining a little light during this difficult and frightening time. And that isn’t the only sign of hope in our locked-down, self-isolated province. There’s a growing sense of possibility that we can emerge from this crisis as a fairer, better community — if we take the lessons of the past months to heart, and if we support each other along the way.

Right now, though, a lot of workers and their families are truly hurting. COVID-19 has upended the livelihoods and economic security of hundreds of thousands of working people.

Unprecedented layoffs and drastic reductions in hours are hitting sectors like food service, retail and hospitality especially hard. These are sectors typically paying low wages, with proportionally higher numbers of women, new immigrants and racialized workers, compounding the ways this crisis already puts an added burden on vulnerable groups.

The scale is staggering. Close to 90 per cent of the members of unions like UNITE HERE and IATSE have lost their jobs in sectors ranging from hotels to film and TV. Now, on top of the danger of the virus itself, these workers must worry about how to pay for housing, food and other essentials.

Yet the hope is as real as the hardship, if not as easy to find. For as long as most of us can remember, many workers have had their labour undervalued or unseen: from those growing, harvesting and transporting our food, to the service workers in grocery stores, restaurants and pharmacies. Today they're finally getting some of the recognition and appreciation they've long deserved. Now it's time to make that appreciation meaningful and long lasting, with permanent increases to their notoriously low wages and improvements in their often-precarious working and safety conditions.

There are signs of hope as well in the outpouring of support and appreciation for workers in sectors like health care, child care and long-term care, to name a few. After the decades-long assault on our public sector, we're realizing just how important it is to have quality public services and programs there when we need them. Across B.C., people are recognizing the need for a stronger, expanded universal health care system — one that includes Pharmacare, home care, mental health care and dental care. There's a long growing consensus on building a robust public child care system, and making much-needed investments in public services like transit and hospitals.

With so many essential workers making sacrifices to buy us the time we need to flatten the curve, the pandemic has also brought to the fore the importance of workplace health and safety. For policymakers and the public alike, it's suddenly much easier to recognize the value of better and safer working conditions, including paid sick leave, fair pay and the right for workers to have a collective voice through joining a union.

These are the lessons and values I'll communicate as the voice of working people on BC's Economic Recovery Task Force: representatives from business, community, First Nations and labour brought together to help guide the province through this difficult time.

History tells us there will be voices advocating that we “recover” by slashing spending and reducing, not strengthening, protections for working people, communities and the environment. That kind of thinking is regressive at the best of times — but right now, it would be disastrous.

This health crisis is shining a bright light on just how much damage has been done through decades of cuts to public services, the social safety net and rollbacks in workplace protections, exposing the severe gaps those cuts have left in our ability to respond collectively and effectively to this challenge.

Instead, we must focus right now on the safety of those who are still on the job and the well-being of those whose livelihoods have been shaken. And in the long term, we have a unique opportunity to rebuild a modern economy through smart, purposeful public investment — one that offers prosperity and opportunity without compromising our social and environmental future, that delivers secure, sustainable jobs, and that provides a network of public supports and services we can be proud of.

This recovery is our chance to offer a better response: one that recognizes working people, building on the foundation of our nightly celebrations, with an economy and a government that work for all of us.

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