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Op-Eds

BC workers should celebrate a remarkable year of progress

It might not be the chatter at your Labour Day BBQ, but make no mistake: 2019 was a remarkable year of progress for workers and their families in B.C.

Let me explain.

It starts with economic security. Tens of thousands of low-wage workers, the majority of whom are women, are now feeling the benefit of the NDP government's boost to the minimum wage. The rate increased to $13.65 per hour on June 1 and is set to go up further to $14.60 and then $15.20 over the next two years, where it will then be the highest in the country.

We know that even with these increases, low-wage workers are still struggling with affordability. That's why we're looking forward to the government-appointed Fair Wages Commission's recommendations on how to further close the gap between living wages and the minimum wage in B.C.

It garnered few headlines, but the spring legislative session saw the NDP government make the first significant updates in decades to B.C.'s Employment Standards Act and Labour Relations Code as well as the introduction of a Temporary Foreign Worker Protection Act.

The improvements, long overdue after decades of deliberate neglect from the BC Liberals, are substantial and worth understanding.

First off, action was taken to protect some of B.C.'s most vulnerable workers. The age children can work in hazardous jobs, for example, was raised from 12 to 16. After a decade of ghastly workplace injury claims from minors, totalling over $5 million, the change was a must.

The exploitation of migrant workers is a significant and ongoing human rights issue in B.C. These workers often face low wages, limited benefits and indebtedness to unscrupulous recruiters.

Thankfully, the provincial government introduced new licensing requirements and a registry for recruiters that migrant workers and advocates believe will deter rampant employment standards abuses.

Second, updates to the Employment Standards Act are set to re-balance power between employees and bad employers. For example, the recent changes eliminated the requirement for workers to fill out their own "self-help kits" when pursuing an employment standards violation. The discredited kits required workers to fill out complaints with their employer, jeopardizing the job security of the worker.

The updates also crack down on the ability of employers to steal tips from their workers, an egregious practice that many workers in the service, delivery and hospitality sectors have had to deal with. Furthermore, the government strengthened the ability of the Employment Standards Branch to enforce and punish this wage theft.

Wage theft is theft, after all, and it was due time our laws treated it as such.

Perhaps the most dramatic shift towards protecting worker rights is the end to "contract flipping." The practice allowed companies to "flip" to lower-cost contracts, pushing down workers' wages, stripping their benefits and disrupting their vacation, shift scheduling and other entitlements. The practice was a scourge in many low-wage industries, including janitorial, food services, security and non-medical health care work. By ending this practice, thousands of low-wage workers, often women and racialized workers, finally have job security.

Third, and for the first time ever, workers facing intimate, personal or relationship violence will have access to protected leave from work. This was the decent thing to do and it’s unconscionable to think B.C. has gone so long without this safety net. The next step must be ensuring this leave is paid.

Finally, changes made to the labour code have reduced barriers to workers seeking to unionize. Unions are a key safeguard against inequality. The Labour Relations Code changes strengthen the prohibition on employer interference and allow for automatic certification when an employer has broken the law. Due to puzzling opposition from the BC Green Party, the unfair requirement for a second vote to certify a union remains. The government did, however, shorten the timeframe before the required second vote to help combat employer interference.

Taken together, these myriad changes stand to make a tangible difference in the lives of countless British Columbians in every corner of the province. Of course, there is much left to do. Growing insecure work, a dysfunctional workers’ compensation system and pending job losses due to mismanaged forestry policy by the BC Liberals come to mind.

Despite the challenges ahead, today we celebrate the remarkable advancements for workers this year in B.C.

Laird Cronk is the President of the BC Federation of Labour.