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Op-Eds

BCFED Labour Day Op-Ed by Irene Lanzinger

Working people and their families will be celebrating in communities across the province this Labour Day long weekend. It's the end of summer, and the one day in the year where workers' contributions to our economy, our social well-being and our communities are recognized.

Thousands will be participating in labour-organized events at picnics and rallies in communities across the province. In the Lower Mainland, many union members will spend the day at the PNE fair with their families—where they'll be joined by Premier John Horgan.

For me this Labour Day is dedicated to two struggles—one where working people are on the picket lines fighting for fairness and respect at work, the other for better employment standards protections to safeguard vulnerable workers from exploitative employers.

In Kamloops, Kelowna, Penticton and Vernon some 700 casino workers will be walking the picket line on Labour Day, with the same determination and commitment as they've shown every day since they went on strike at Gateway Casinos on June 29. The members of the BC Government and Service Employees Union are seeking a living wage, better working conditions, and respect on the job.

There's no disputing the gaming industry is extremely profitable. But two weeks ago, when I walked the picket line with striking workers in Kelowna, I heard stories about those who have worked for Gateway for eight years and still make minimum wage. In a province as rich as ours where so many

struggle to make ends meet because of the high cost of living, that’s unacceptable.

Meanwhile, disturbing allegations have recently been made about how vulnerable workers at two Subway restaurants were cheated out of stat holiday pay and overtime that they worked. There are also allegations that staff—many of whom are new Canadians—faced bullying by their employer.

These complaints are now being investigated. And to his credit, new labour minister Harry Bains is urging workers to come forward and lay complaints. But the challenge in winning justice is that current employment standards laws are rigged against workers, an injustice that Bains says he’s eager to change.

Why? Because the BC Liberals significantly weakened basic protections that safeguarded workers, cut back on enforcement, and tied the hands of government officials so that they couldn’t proactively investigate violations.

The labour movement in BC has a proud tradition of fighting to improve wages, conditions and protections for all workers—including those who aren’t currently union members. A recent example is our Fight For $15 Campaign where we successfully mobilized support to give BC’s lowest paid employees a raise by increasing the minimum wage to $15 an hour—a move that will benefit close to 500,000 workers.

We believe that improvements to basic employment laws to better protect workers are long overdue. That’s why these changes are a key element in our new Level the Playing Field Campaign launched earlier this year, which also includes calls to:

• restore fairness and balance in the labour code to remove the barriers imposed by the BC Liberals for workers to join unions to improve wages and conditions;
• make our workplaces safe and improve workers’ compensation payments for those who are injured or killed on the job; and
• provide better access to apprenticeships and training to address skill shortages and ensure opportunities for future workers.

Our proposals for employment standards reforms focus on ensuring that all workers have access to paid sick leave. It might come as a surprise to many but as the law stands now, a worker can be fired for being sick.

We recently surveyed more than 1,300 workers in BC on the topic of sick leave. Nearly half the workers we heard from do not have access to paid sick leave. Many of these were younger, part-time and lower paid employees who simply can’t afford losing pay because of illness.

The absence of any paid sick leave requirement means when workers are ill, most of them go to work. And it’s not just that they need the income to make ends meet. We found that many aren’t permitted to take an unpaid sick day unless they can find someone else to cover their shift.

Forcing workers go to work sick is bad for all of us because it reduces productivity, lengthens recovery time, makes others sick and can even put people’s lives at risk. We call for paid sick days to be made available to all working people in the Employment Standards Act.

Our new NDP provincial government has made a number of important commitments that will improve the lives of working people in BC. We believe that can be accomplished through better employment standards, safer workplaces, fairness and balance in labour laws, and better access to apprenticeships and skills training programs to create more opportunities for good-paying work. We need to level the playing field for workers sooner, rather than later.

-Lanzinger is President of the 500,000 member BC Federation of Labour