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Op-Eds

“Buying BC” starts with investing in workers

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If there’s one bright spot in the tariff war Donald Trump is waging on us, it’s the way we’ve come together to support each other and build up our local economy.

Many of us are heeding the call to “Buy BC” around everything from wine and fresh produce to where we take our vacations, with steep drops in trips to the US. Our governments are largely doing the same, with one notable misstep. More on that in a moment.

The goal is obvious. Keeping our dollars at home helps BC businesses and communities weather the storm. And it lets Americans know BC, at least, isn’t about to give in to threats and pressure.

But if we’re serious about building a thriving, resilient province, our efforts need to focus at least as much on the foundation of our economy as they do at the checkout line. And that means investing in working people.

Workers are the engine of our economy. Without us, nothing gets done: no services delivered, no products made, no resources processed. Stores don’t open and communities don’t function without the labour that working people provide. Buying BC starts with investing in the people who create the

value that drives our economy.

There’s no shortage of ways to make those investments. The most fundamental is by paying good wages that let people live and raise families in the communities where they work. But many BC jobs fall short of even that basic benchmark. The gap between the provincial minimum wage and the living wage varies from community to community, but it’s unacceptable everywhere — and runs as high as $10/hour.

Another way we can invest in BC workers is with training and education, to ensure our workforce has the skills we need to keep pace with a rapidly changing economy. The latest provincial labour market outlook projects a need for 668,700 workers over the next decade with at least some post-secondary or apprenticeship training.

Then there are the public services and infrastructure that workers and their families rely on and that communities need to thrive: from quality public health care and education to transportation and public transit.

Take, for example, our *Connecting BC* plan for building a modern public transit network throughout BC. From rapid transit in our largest urban centres to connecting our regions and smaller communities with express bus service, this plan would be a tremendous boost to BC’s economy, generating roughly 16,800 jobs per year from construction and 23,700 jobs from ongoing operations.

And much of the plan’s costs would be recovered from economic growth and revenue generated through increased density near new and expanded transit hubs. (Those new transit investments attract new, denser housing and commercial spaces. That itself generates new revenue; so does the increase in land value near those hubs, which brings in more property taxes. That density also reduces commute times and congestion, leading to lower costs and higher productivity.)

The impact would extend beyond that, too: less congestion, shorter commutes, more reliable transportation, higher productivity and progress toward our emission reduction targets.

Or consider BC Ferries' recent ill-considered decision to buy its next four major vessels from China instead of from shipbuilders here at home.

Building those vessels in BC would create more than 5,000 well-paying jobs in our province, injecting $1.2 billion in workers' wages into local economies — and securing BC's shipbuilding sector as a major source of prosperity for decades to come. By failing to account for those impacts, and focusing so heavily on shortsighted criteria, BC Ferries is about to cost our province a huge opportunity.

Labour Day is a reminder of the power working people have when we organize and stand together. It should also be a reminder to decision-makers of what really powers our economy, and who it needs to serve. And for a long time, BC's economy has been leaving a lot of working people behind.

We have an opportunity to change that. Let's buy BC products — and let's back BC workers.