June 8, 2021 |

Statements

Statement on City of Vancouver's drug decriminalization proposal

The BC Federation of Labour (BCFED) is committed to ensuring a safe supply of drugs and to working with all levels of government to decriminalize personal possession of drugs. This commitment was renewed with the adoption of resolution 181 at our 2020 convention. We have been alarmed with government inaction as a toxic drug supply, harmful criminalization and stigma, and the impacts of the pandemic have combined to create staggering death rates in Vancouver and across BC.

Every day, workers, colleagues, friends, neighbours and family members are dying from toxic drugs. And it is getting worse. One hundred and seventy-six people died in April of this year alone. From January to April of 2021, 680 people died, a massive increase over the 390 deaths in the same period last year. Indigenous people are dying in disproportionate numbers. Action must be taken urgently.

It is in this context that the BCFED supports the City of Vancouver's important proposal to Health Canada requesting an exemption from the *Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (CDSA)* under the provision of section 56(1). The exemption would mean people found in possession of a controlled substance under a certain threshold, and within municipal boundaries, would not be subject to criminal sanctions or have their drugs confiscated; rather they would have the opportunity to be connected to supportive health and substance use services should they choose.

The toxic drug supply and criminalization of substance use are not often thought of as “worker issues.” For many workers, however, opioid addiction follows after a workplace injury and interaction with the workers’ compensation system. Some injured workers experience addiction because of poor pain management or because they are pushed back to work before they have healed. This is why the BCFED is also calling for reforms to the workers’ compensation system to better support injured workers.

The BCFED sees the City of Vancouver’s proposal as an important first step to halting unprecedented deaths, and a paradigm shift in our societal approach to substance use and policing. It will help reduce stigma, increase access to services and supports, and dispense with the long-lasting and negative impacts of criminalization, policing and incarceration on the lives of people who use drugs; impacts that are felt disproportionately by the poor, as well as Black and Indigenous communities. The BCFED would like to see this model apply across the province.