

You may have heard on the news this week that 33,000 public service members of BCGEU – the largest public sector union in BC, representing more than 80,000 workers in total – have voted 94.6% in favour of job action. These workers include firefighters, correctional officers, social workers, administrative staff, workers at BC Liquor and Cannabis stores and warehouses and, of particular interest to us, post-secondary faculty and support staff.

Why should this matter to us?

Over many public sector bargaining periods, the government has relied on the first agreement with a public sector union to set the economic conditions (aka wage or salary increases and other financial improvements) and term of the agreement for all of the public sector. This is referred to as the “mandate” (see <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/employment-business/employers/public-sector-employers/public-sector-bargaining/mandates-and-agreements>).

BCGEU began negotiations with the Public Service Agency (aka the employer) in February and, following two disappointing wage proposals from the employer, declared an impasse, and started preparing their members for a strike vote, which was carried out from May 16 to June 22. BCGEU has been clear in its message to the government that anything less than a cost-of-living increase amounts to a pay cut for its members, and that is untenable. Their members clearly support this stance.

This overwhelmingly favourable strike vote gives BCGEU and its members the ability to engage in all forms of job action, up to and including a full-on strike, picket lines and all. But the best place to get to an agreement is at the bargaining table, and the parties will return to the table on Monday, June 27.

It’s likely that BCGEU will be the first public sector union to reach a new agreement and will thus most likely set the mandate for the rest of us. That’s why their fight is our fight, and it’s why we should do everything we can to support them in their fight.

How can we support BCGEU?

Public sector bargaining is always tough, especially when we’re seeking substantial wage increases - public opinion is rarely on our side, largely because it is the public who pays the cost of those wage increases through their taxes (and let’s face it, almost no one likes tax increases), but also because it doesn’t result in similar wage increases outside the public sector.

We all have connections within our communities – through our families, churches, community groups, schools, professional networks and more – and it’s likely that some of those people are public sector workers, possibly even BCGEU members. Working together we can educate those in the private sector why our ability to keep up with the cost of living is important to all of us, why being able to continue to

buy *at least* the same amount of food, gas, utilities, and other necessities of life, and to afford housing to shelter us, benefits our communities and keeps our economy healthy.

Over the last 20 years, our members have lost more than 11% in buying power – that’s 11% less that is going to support small businesses within our community, 11% less that we can spend on keeping our kids engaged in community activities, 11% less that we can spend on healthy food to keep our minds and bodies strong and able, and 11% less that we can use to pay for increasingly costly housing (for reference, between January 2002 and January 2022, the average cost to buy a house in British Columbia increased by almost 51%). But the cost of living has increased 10% over the 2021 average in *this year alone*, so it feels like what we’ve lost in the past 5 months is the equivalent of what it took 20 years to accomplish. This should matter to all of us because the health of the economy and our communities is not measured in individuals, it is measured in the collective.

Should BCGEU members get to the point of engaging in job action, you can support them in our communities. You can wear a message – a button, a sticker, a sign in your vehicle’s window – declaring your support for BCGEU workers in their fight for fair wages for all public sector workers when we are out and about in our communities.

And if BCGEU workers end up on strike, you can support them on the picket lines (on your own time, of course). BCGEU workers are everywhere in our communities, so it won’t be hard to find them. Honk in support as you drive by them. Bring them food, coffee, hand warmers and scarves (in cold weather), portable fans from the dollar store (in hot weather). Walk the picket lines with them (make a sign with your personal message on it and ask the FSA for swag you can carry with you). Make sure they know you are with the FSA and that you thank them for taking on this fight for all public sector workers. Because, after all, their fight is our fight.

In solidarity,
Colleen Bell
Bargaining Vice-President