THE HISTORY OF HEU

A *LONG AND PROUD* TRADITION

Besides the historic equality gains the Hospital Employees' Union has made for its members over the past seven decades, HEU is recognized as a leading defender of Canada's public health care system.

It's a reputation rooted in the union's earliest battles for better standards of care in the 1940s, when hospitals were funded by whatever fees they could squeeze out of patients and by tiny grants from city governments to care for the "indigent".

It's why union members fought for better hospital insurance in British Columbia, and for a national system of medicare. It's why HEU advocated for extended care for seniors back in the 1950s, and still opposes long-term care closures in our communities.

And it's why the union continues to fight for quality, public health care services today.

IN THE *BEGINNING*

HEU is B.C.'s oldest and largest health care union. But when workers created HEU nearly seven decades ago, the union had only 300 members working in just one facility – Vancouver General Hospital (VGH). And those members, like all hospital employees throughout the province at the time, worked for very low wages in terrible conditions.

Hours were long, breaks were few, and there was no formal sick leave or protections against being fired unfairly. It was these sweatshop conditions that motivated health care workers to create a union that could stand up for equality, fairness, respect and social justice.

BUILDING THE UNION

When an all-women's union and an all-men's union at VGH joined forces to create HEU in 1944, members wanted a structure that would give them the power they needed to improve their working conditions. And so they chose to organize as an "industrial union" – a model that crossed traditional craft and occupational lines.

HEU's very first members included job titles like orderlies, cleaners, kitchen workers, maintenance workers, laundry workers, storemen, painters, ward assistants, household workers, tuberculosis unit and powerhouse workers.

Nursing team members also formed an important part of the union from its earliest days. Through HEU, they were able to win a shorter work-week with improved wages and benefits.

It didn't take long for HEU members to see that the industrial model worked. Or that their working conditions

were closely linked to the care they were able to provide.

When public pressure forced government to fund an extended public health care system after World War II, the union's membership quickly grasped that they had a critical role to play as health care advocates.

Membership grew rapidly as hospitals expanded and the union won improvements to wages and working conditions. In 1968, members used their strength to bargain the first province-wide master agreement, which standardized wages and conditions in every unionized hospital.

ORGANIZING THE UNORGANIZED

By 1971, HEU represented workers at 69 facilities – mostly acute care hospitals – but the long-term care sector was largely unorganized. And it showed. The conditions in the sector, especially in privately operated facilities, were deplorable for both residents and workers.

But after a decade-long campaign, HEU represented 77 long-term care work sites in a sector that, by 1983, was 70 per cent organized. These workers had many reasons for joining HEU, but according to one organizer, at the time, they were chiefly motivated by "a sense of unfairness."

It was that same sense of unfairness – especially the lack of parity with other health care workers doing similar work – that led to successful organizing efforts in the 1980s and 1990s in the community health and community social services sectors. And it's the struggle for fairness and respect that continues to attract newly organized health care workers to HEU today.

ENDING WAGE *DISCRIMINATION*

By 1970, the union had embraced the fight to end gender-based wage discrimination. By filing a successful human rights complaint on behalf of 10 radiology attendants at Vancouver General Hospital, the union won big wage hikes for the workers.

A 1973 complaint, filed on behalf of practical nurses in Kimberley, yielded similar results, which led to a major equal pay campaign. More than 600 human rights cases were filed.

Finally, the B.C. NDP government of the day negotiated an agreement with HEU that saw 8,400 of its members receive "anti-discrimination" pay adjustments.

Though progress continued to be made through the job review process in the 1980s, women were still concentrated in the lowest paid occupations. And, in a female-dominated sector, both men and women were underpaid in comparison to other industries.

That's why the union put "pay equity" at the top of its bargaining agenda. And through job action in 1992, HEU won pay equity language in the province-wide master from the NDP government. This resulted in the establishment of pay equity targets, and annual adjustments worth hundreds of millions of dollars to HEU members.

Although these gains were undermined by B.C.'s Liberal government in 2004, the principle of pay equity remains one of HEU's most important achievements, and a benchmark in our work to eliminate wage discrimination.

THE *STRUGGLE* CONTINUES

In 2002, B.C.'s Liberal government – under the leadership of Gordon Campbell – arbitrarily eliminated key job security provisions in HEU's collective agreement with the passage of *Bill 29*, the *Health and Social Services Delivery Improvement Act*. This legislation allowed health authorities to lay off thousands of health care support workers, without cause, and privatize their work. It was the biggest mass firing of women workers in the history of the Canadian labour movement. And the newly privatized jobs reduced wages and eliminated previously hard-won benefits.

Then, during a strike by health facilities members in 2004, the BC Liberals arbitrarily imposed a 15 per cent wage rollback through *Bill 37* – the *Health Sector (Facilities Subsector) Collective Agreement Act*. The fallout from those events generated controversy and debate among HEU members, and revitalized the bargaining process.

Attempts to return health care to the days when poor wages and working conditions were "the norm" continue to meet with opposition. And many newly privatized workers have overcome significant organizing obstacles to join HEU.

HISTORIC *VICTORY*

On June 8, 2007, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled key sections of *Bill 29* to be unconstitutional under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. After a five-year court challenge and months of negotiations, a $75-million compensation package was established for HEU members impacted by the legislation. And for the first time in history, free collective bargaining has become a charter-protected right for all Canadian workers.

WHERE DO WE *GO* FROM HERE?

With B.C.'s current health care climate, many HEU members are working in areas impacted by restructuring and privatization. Gone are the days when most HEU members were covered by one master provincial agreement. HEU now negotiates about 100 collective agreements for facilities, community health, community social services, First Nations, "Big 3" (Sodexo, Aramark and Compass) and other independents.

But like the generations of health care workers who went before them, today's HEU membership is a force to be reckoned with when it comes to standing up for decent jobs and quality patient care.

That's why thousands of workers continue to join HEU to help them deliver better care to those they look after, and secure a better deal for themselves and their families.

IT'S A LEGACY TO BE PROUD OF AND A TESTIMONY TO THE UNION'S GREATEST STRENGTH – THE POWER THAT COMES WITH SOLIDARITY.