

Contract talks set to start for 29,000 workers who provide important public services

Negotiations for a new contract for 29,000 unionized public servants begin today in Vancouver when the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union and representatives of the provincial government exchange proposals.

"There's no doubt this is going to be a challenging round of negotiations," says BCGEU president Darryl Walker. "But we will be working creatively to find solutions that work for our members, government and for British Columbians who depend on the services our members provide."

Walker says priority areas for the union at the bargaining table include employment security, benefit improvements, and compensation.

"Our proposals will focus on winnable issues that resolve long standing inequities," says Walker, "like ensuring that veteran fire fighters who put their lives at risk to keep our forests from burning every summer are finally covered by benefits."

Walker says his union will be seeking a three per cent annual pay boost in line with what the provincial government has already negotiated with registered nurses and doctors. "Bargaining only works when there's one set of rules that applies to all involved," he says.

To help pay for contract improvements, the BCGEU will also table proposals that will significantly increase government revenue. "For example, opening all of our public liquor stores on Sunday will create an additional net revenue of \$150 million a year for the government to use to settle contracts and protect important public services," Walker says.

While Walker says his union is prepared to work creatively to reach a negotiated settlement, he cautions that can only happen if there are real improvements for his members. "We won't be settling for nothing," he says.

The two sides meet for two days this week Jan. 12 and 13 to review proposals. Then talks resume at the end of January, with additional dates set right through to March 31 when the contract expires.

BCGEU members covered by the talks include child protection social workers, staff who protect the environment, corrections officers, conservation officers, public liquor store employees, and administrative workers who live and work in communities across the province.

-30-

Contact: Brian Gardiner, BCGEU communications (604) 291-9611