

Voice



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CUPE Alberta President Marle Roberts (far right), was at the legislature this fall with BloodWatch.org Executive Director Kat Lanteigne (far left) and Friends of Medicare Chairperson Sandra Azocar (inside right) to present 15,000 signatures on a petition to Health Minister Sarah Hoffman (inside left). The petition called on the Alberta government to “implement legislation that ensures no for-profit, donor-paid blood plasma collection clinics are allowed to operate in Canada.” Read more at Friendsofmedicare.org.

Departure from Fort M^cMurray

A CUPE member tells her story

By Crystal Sali

Tuesdays will never be the same for Fort M^cMurray residents. Tuesday, May 3, 2016 was the day over 80,000 people fled the Wood Buffalo region looking for safety. Being forced out by the largest forest fire in Canadian history will be something I remember forever.

In the days before the evacuation, lunch room breaks at my school were spent talking about forest fires. How to be prepared, what you can do. My co-worker's son is a fire fighter, she told me her son said, "Mom, every spring make sure you have a full tank of gas, and a grab bag with important documents and such. When we come knocking on your door and tell you that you need to leave, that means you need to leave now." Those were words that I will remember for a lifetime and will share with others.

The students at my school get three recesses, one in the morning, one at lunch time and one in the afternoon. On Monday, because of smoke, students were not allowed to go outside at all. On Tuesday we went outside for our first recess, and things appeared to be normal. During our lunch recess we were all called back into the school as the smoke had become worse. I looked behind the school and saw the smoke. It looked close, and it made me think of what a tornado cloud looks like.

The children were all busy playing, and some were confused as to why they needed to go back in the school since there was less smoke than

during morning recess.

When I left for my lunch at about 1:20 pm, I noticed that the sky was looking different. I had discussed with my husband that I would go get gas and pet food on my lunch hour. The sight was out of a movie. The streets were busier, gas stations had line ups. By this time the realization that this fire was getting close really sunk in. I received a text from my husband telling me that the fire jumped the Athabasca River, followed with "they have evacuated Beacon Hill, Waterways, Grayling Terrace, Abasand, and now Thickwood is on evacuation." We live in Timberlea, so I calmed myself, no word of anything there yet.

I heard from my stepdaughter next, who said she was evacuated from school and with her Mom. They were getting ready to leave town.

Upon my arrival back to my school's parking lot, I saw parents picking up their children. Panic set in. The wave of evacuations had come our way.

Each school had a plan, and on this particular Tuesday the level of calmness that was witnessed at my school was amazing. The Fort M^cMurray Public School staff were amazing. There are protocols that we practice time and time again, but nothing prepares you for a mass evacuation.

Word of homes being lost to the fire also spread. Not only having to be strong for their students, some staff had to hold their emotions together as they found out that they had lost



On Monday the smoke looked similar to a tornado cloud.



On Tuesday the fire was this close to the school.



The view across the street from the high school.

their own homes. We worked hard to keep the panic amongst the children to a minimum. The office staff was overwhelmed with parents coming to pick up their children, lists were made, phone calls to parents were made, and one by one students were picked up.

Because roads were jammed packed and grid locked, it took a long time to unite students with their families. And not all families were able to unite right away. The strong and resilient staff took students with them and cared for them until they could be with their families. Some took hours, others took days. The safety of our students was the main priority. Together as a district, we made it happen.

Months later you can still see where the fire hit and what it took from our community. Over the summer, Fort M^cMurray Public School staff worked hard to get schools ready for the new year. There was much talk of what to expect on the first day, the first hours or even the first weeks. Seeing someone, child or parent



After the return. Fort M^cMurray CUPE members get together and reconnect.

or school employees crying can have several meanings. Discussions were on-going of what those first fire drills would look like.

Professionals have given advice “What is going to be the same? What might be a little different?” One school has decided that they will not use the actual fire bell, as that may cause some anxiety among everyone. Resources have been given to staff, protocols are still in place, new supplies were ordered. Together we were (and are) determined to make it a great year.

Colleagues met and hugs were given, tears were shed and the windshield is getting clearer, but the rear view mirror is still there. Smiles appear, laughter can be heard. We know what happened. We will not forget. We will keep moving forward. We will rebuild our community with help from all of Canada. We are Fort M^cMurray, Alberta Strong. 🌸

Voice

VOICE is produced by the CUPE Alberta Literacy and Communications committee:

Deborah Stewart
Sheila Stewart
John Vradenburg
Crystal Sali
Gary Warren

Back issues are available at:
www.alberta.cupe.ca

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Do you have photos of CUPE members?

We are always looking for pictures of our members at work, in the community or at CUPE events.

Please send them to:

pkinahan@cupe.ca



Canada Pension Plan to expand



In an effort to combat the levels of poverty among Canadian seniors, Federal Finance Minister Bill Morneau, along with eight provincial finance ministers, signed an agreement last spring substantially improving the Canada Pension Plan (CPP).

Requiring support from the federal government and at least seven provinces, representing two thirds of the national population, the changes to CPP may be new, but the problem with Canadian pensions is not.

As the state of employer pensions in Canada has become increasingly bleak, support amongst the nation's finance ministers has finally reached a tipping point.

Statistics Canada data between 1976 and 2011 shows, private sector pension coverage, of any kind, peaked in 1982 at only 31.7%. Since then there has been a steady decline in overall coverage. The problem is particularly acute in Alberta, which has the lowest workplace pension coverage rate in the country.

Contrary to what is often claimed by business groups and conservative politicians, non-workplace retirement savings schemes are not filling the pension gap. Only about 25% of Canadians who earned between \$40,000 and \$60,000 contributed to an RRSP in 2010, while only about 38% of all Albertans made RRSP contributions. According to Statistics Canada, the lower a person's income,

the less likely they are to contribute to an RRSP - so those who most need an income source in retirement are least likely to have one.

Expanding the CPP is designed to address the obvious shortfall in middle-income retirement planning, the result of disappearing workplace pensions. The new improvements represent the most substantive change to the national retirement plan since it was established in 1965.

Starting in 2019, employers and employees will see gradual increases in premiums over seven years. The upper income limit, from which an individual's contributions are calculated, will be increased by 50 percent over the same period from \$54,900 to \$82,700. The new program will pay benefits of one third of income earned, up to the income ceiling, rather than the current one quarter.

The Department of Finance estimates that someone currently earning \$50,000 over the course of a working lifetime will receive a pension of approximately \$12,000 annually. Under the new guidelines a similar earner will receive an annual pension of \$16,000.

At a time where retirement insecurity has reached a crisis point, expanding the CPP is a welcome change. 🌸

DID YOU KNOW – Why do we have workers’ compensation?

By John Vradenburg, CUPE 474

Workers’ Compensation is a form of insurance designed to give benefits, medical care, and rehabilitation to employees who suffer workplace injuries or occupational diseases.

It started in 1889, when the Royal Commission on the Relations of Labour and Capital condemned the oppressiveness of working conditions in many industries, and made recommendations to improve those conditions, including the premise of Workers’ Compensation legislation.

This legislation’s premise was that injuries at work are inevitable, and that compensation should be provided without regard for responsibility.

The Federal Government of the day believed that acting upon those recommendations would infringe on Provincial authority, so for years after, workers had to put up with private insurance or

try suing their employers through the courts – an expensive process that seldom produced results in the worker’s favour.

The principals and recommendations of the Royal Commission report were first adopted in 1914 by Ontario, and later by other provinces. Early workers’ compensation systems were based on these principles:

- **NO FAULT COMPENSATION:** workers are paid benefits regardless of how the injury occurred. The worker and employer waive the right to sue. There is no argument over responsibility or liability for an injury.
- **SECURITY OF BENEFITS:** Employers contribute to a fund to guarantee money exists to pay benefits to injured workers.
- **COLLECTIVE LIABILITY:** all employers share



Workers’ Compensation was designed to give benefits to injured workers without having to take their employer to court. If you are injured on the job, do not delay medical attention.

liability for workplace injury insurance. The total cost of the compensation system is shared by all employers. Financial liability becomes the collective responsibility of all employers.

- **INDEPENDENT ADMINISTRATION:** the organizations who administer workers' compensation insurance are separate from government.

- **EXCLUSIVE JURISDICTION:** only workers' compensation organizations can provide workers' compensation insurance. All compensation claims are made directly to the compensation board. The board is the decision-maker and final authority for all claims.

Initially, only workers in hazardous industries were included, however, legislation applies to almost every industry, as well as applicable in every jurisdiction. Alberta became the last province in Canada to include agricultural workers when the Notley government passed Bill 6 last winter.

If you have been injured at work, keep the following in mind throughout the WCB process:

- Don't assume the injury or condition will get better on its own. Report the injury immediately and seek medical attention.
- When speaking with your doctor, be clear and thorough when discussing your symptoms and make sure they know the symptoms are work-related.
- Know the names of your co-workers who may have been witnesses to your accident as their testimony may be needed later.
- Document everything, write down when and who you talked to at work about your injury and what they said.
- Don't procrastinate. There are strict statutes of limitations for workers' compensation claims. Notify your employer verbally and in writing of the accident immediately.
- Don't assume that the company doctor's diagnosis or rating are the final word. Get your own doctor to examine you.
- Don't assume your employer is looking out for your best interests.

For more information, contact your CUPE National Representative. 🌸

CUPE Alberta Scholarship Winner



Alexander, son of CUPE 1158 member Deborah Stewart, was presented his prize in October by CUPE Alberta President Marle Roberts (left) and Northern Vice President David Graham (right). For more information about scholarships available to CUPE members and their children, see www.alberta.cupe.ca 🌸

Volunteers in our workplaces

Volunteering is an important activity in Canada. From coast to coast Canadian people give their time to groups, associations, and public institutions that they hold dear. Statistics Canada estimates that about 60% of people above the age of fifteen, or about 17 million of the total population, will volunteer for a charitable or non-profit organization at some point in their lives.

Despite the obvious benefits – assisting the community, building skills, and facilitating a feeling of pride and satisfaction – volunteerism is not without its challenges within the context of a union shop. Employers often take advantage of volunteers as free labour, pitting employees and volunteers against each other.

Despite tricks employers might play, there are opportunities for volunteers and organized labour to work together.

In 2013, almost 45 percent, or about 12.7 million Canadians, over the age of 15, reported volunteering in the year prior, and the number is growing. In fact, between 2004 and 2013, the estimated number of volunteers grew 7 percent. In total, Canadian volunteers contributed 1.96 billion volunteer hours, equivalent to about 1 million full-time, year-round jobs, in 2013 alone.

For volunteers across the country, volunteering is about far more than finding ways to pass the time; it is about a sense of community and identity. In the same 2013 Statistics Canada study, participants were asked about their reasons for giving their time. An overwhelming 93 percent indicated that they hope to contribute to the well-being of their communities. Many participants also reported positive impacts upon overall wellbeing, health, knowledge level, and skill development.

When volunteers come to give their time in an organized workplace – whether in a healthcare facility, a classroom, or another organization – they do so largely on the employer's terms. It is the employer who determines how many volunteers will be admitted to the workplace,

what work volunteers will be doing, the process for recruiting and training, and every other aspect of the volunteers' participation. Volunteers themselves, as well as their organizations, often have little or no input into the work in which they participate.

When volunteers are present in workplaces, during the competition of interests between employers and unions, employers often utilize control over volunteers to their advantage. They can, for example, direct volunteers to do work of the bargaining unit, either in an attempt to gain leverage against the union at the bargaining table or to simply reduce costs by exploiting free labour. Unions can be left feeling that volunteers are working against them, while volunteers can feel that unions are oblivious to their interests. All the while, employers often benefit from the conflict.

There are few easy solutions. Unions have to negotiate firmly with their employers to draw clear lines about what is and is not acceptable work to be given to volunteers. Unions have to be firm that paid work is done by employees, while finding a role for volunteers to add value to the organization. Finding that balance is difficult, and as volunteers do not have a similarly-organized structure, identifying their interests and coordinating dialogue can be difficult.

Just like volunteers want a happy, productive and harassment free environment to participate in – union members do too. On occasion, friction or personalities clash between our members and volunteers. It's the employer's job to manage those environments and make sure that everyone's needs are met. It's the union's job to look out for its members and make sure their workplaces are happy and healthy – even if it means taking a firm stand against a troublesome volunteer.

In spite of the challenges, however, real opportunities exist for unions and volunteers to collaborate. Informing volunteers of what falls within employees' job descriptions, for



Who could possibly be against volunteers in the classroom? Unfortunately, sometimes unions have to be.

example, can help to ensure that volunteers are not unwittingly swept up in contentious labour relations issues. Building good relationships with volunteers help to diminish employers' ability to pit volunteers and working people against each another, and to prevent volunteers from ever being co-opted as scabs.

It is reasonable to think, that in an era of increasingly precarious employment, volunteerism

will continue to be prominent. It may be that people with part-time employment opt to volunteer their time, as a way to build skills, make connections, and to help their communities. As changes in the workforce unfold, it will be necessary for working people and their unions to work together with volunteers to improve the services we all hold dear. 🌸