

ALERT

A special bulletin for all BCGEU
component 1 members

Please post
September 27, 2006

High turnover of corrections staff, excessive prisoner head counts attract media attention

PROBLEMS WITH PRISON overcrowding and high turnover of corrections officers are back in the news, and while BCGEU says it's more evidence of the problems caused by government cutbacks, Solicitor General John Les says the situation is "manageable."

First off the mark was a Victoria television station which investigated staff turnover and shortages at the Wilkinson Rd./Vancouver Island Regional Correctional Centre. Then a Vancouver radio outlet broke the news that the North Fraser Pre-Trial Centre held 670 inmates last week—in excess of its 490-prisoner maximum head count.

BCGEU Component 1 chairperson Dean Purdy says both situations show how the deep cuts made in the B.C. Liberal's first term are still creating a crisis in the system. Purdy says that since the beginning of 2006, 29 corrections staff have left the VIRCC. That's a startling turnover rate of 25 per cent.

And he warns that reliance on overtime to deal with staff shortages is rampant. "The high turnover rate reflects the deteriorating working conditions and general overcrowding caused by the deep cuts to corrections," says Purdy.

Meanwhile union president George Heyman says the North Fraser head count numbers are unacceptable. The facility has 340 cells, which means that every inmate was double bunked.

"With prisoners incarcerated under worsening conditions, the stress and agitation levels of inmates are going to be very high," says Heyman. "That can only lead to an increased risk of violent behaviour and deteriorating working conditions for corrections officers."

Heymans says that the union succeeded in winning significant additional wage increases for

provincial corrections staff during the last round of bargaining to address recruitment and retention issues. But, he says, it was not enough to give staff parity with their federal counterparts.

"Now we're seeing the result—they're leaving for other jurisdictions," says Heyman.

Purdy says BCGEU is working to come up with solutions. "We've formed a special Component 1 committee to gather statistics about staff turnover and staffing shortages at all provincial corrections facilities," he says.

And Heyman says the union will keep up the pressure on government to open closed facilities and staff provincial jails adequately.

Meanwhile, Solicitor General John Les says that widespread prisoner double bunking is not a problem. And he says that the high prisoner staff ratio is "manageable." A corrections spokesperson denied that staffing shortages exist.

Les acknowledges that some corrections officers are leaving for better pay at federal institutions. "It is a very competitive economic environment right now," he told radio station CKNW. "There are lots of jobs out there. People will always move from one job to the next looking for better or different opportunities."

BCGEU's Heyman warns that a booming economy and mostly symbolic increases in some government ministry budgets can't hide the fact that the cuts made by the B.C. Liberals in their first term continue to have harmful consequences for our province.

"The situation at these two corrections facilities highlight the drastic need for government to reinvest in public services," he says.

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