100 years and counting

The Provincial Civil Service Association of British Columbia held its first annual convention in Vancouver on July 26, 1919. There were 37 delegates at that convention representing a total of 980 members. Five of them were women. All were direct employees of the provincial government serving a population of 400,000 citizens.

What a difference a hundred years makes.

Since that first convention in 1919, we transitioned from association to union. We fought for and won bargaining rights. We grew and expanded our membership beyond government service. We organized and picketed, we diversified our focus and we strengthened our core values. Today, your union is one of the fastest growing, most diverse and dynamic labour unions in Canada. We represent members working in every community across the province and almost every sector of the economy, and we are recognized as a leading voice for progressive social change in Canada.

We’re a democratic union of 79,000 members making our province work for working people through labour relations, member education, and public advocacy.

Our centennial is an incredible opportunity to look back and connect with our history. To remind ourselves and each other why our union was founded and how the values that drove our founders—upholding and protecting the interests and rights of workers—are still relevant today. It’s an opportunity to recognize what we’ve achieved working together as BCGEU activists and with our family in the broader labour movement, standing up for working people and helping working people stand up for themselves. It’s an opportunity to acknowledge how much has changed and what remains the same.

It’s an opportunity to imagine, and prepare for, another 100 years of activism and advocacy for our union and the labour movement across Canada and internationally.

Most of all, our centennial is a chance to tell our stories as working people, as BCGEU activists, and as trade unionists. That’s why, throughout this year, we will be working with activists and staff in area offices, locals, components and with cross-component committees. We’re going to discover, recognize, and celebrate the people, places, and milestones that made us what we are today.

We’re a democratic union of 79,000 members making our province work for working people through labour relations, member education, and public advocacy. We will be relying on each of you to share stories, experiences and artifacts that capture our union’s history, exemplify the lessons we’ve learned along the way, and inspire future generations of activists.

I’m looking forward to a centennial year packed with activist appreciation events, member receptions and community gatherings that showcase our history, honour our present and celebrate our future.
Managing the province’s finances is a tough job. Especially when it means making up the lost ground for many British Columbians and fixing serious problems left by a previous government. B.C. Budget 2019, released in February, continues to move our province on its fresh path by adding to the many investments and programs announced last year.

“After years of speaking up for our members, we were so encouraged by the big changes made by this government in 2018,” said BCGEU president Stephanie Smith. “There were some questions over whether this pace of reinvestment in quality services would expand or slow down in this year’s budget, so it’s impressive that the new fiscal plan continues the important renewal process we’re seeing for British Columbians—including new commitments as well.”

The first NDP budget in 2018 dramatically shifted government priorities toward services designed to make British Columbians’ lives more affordable, particularly for women entering the workforce and vulnerable groups at the margin.

B.C. Budget 2019 stays the course on these milestone programs—specifically, affordable housing and universal affordable child care. It delivers planned funding increases, along with some notable additions to each of those strategies. The budget also continues to invest in other areas of the public service, such as wildfire response.

New budget commitments will see an additional $1.5 billion invested this year in programs and services for creating a more people-centred, inclusive and affordable B.C. Even with the additional spending, the fiscal plan marks another balanced budget for the government and our province.

“The budget and poverty reduction strategy show a serious commitment to B.C. workers and their families.”

“I think what it shows is the province can achieve nation-leading economic growth while continuing to close the gap on underfunded services and supports to families and workers,” said Smith. “Public investments are not just good social investments, but profitable economic investments for the entire province and our future.”

One of the most significant measures in the budget is a new B.C. Child Opportunity Benefit that will greatly expand the existing credit for working families. It increases the maximum one-child amount from $660 to $1,600 annually, and to $2,600 and $3,400 for eligible two- and three-child families respectively.

The budget also unveils a ground-breaking revenue-sharing agreement with B.C. First Nations, and some modest investments to support government’s new CleanBC climate plan.

Although the budget stopped short of revealing government’s poverty reduction plan, this long-anticipated strategy was introduced weeks later, on March 18, 2019.

“Like the budget, we know there’s room for improvement—particularly concerning income assistance rates and the resources needed for delivering that program effectively. But it’s better than a good start.”

Our union will support the government as it continues with this effort.

“BCGEU members from around the province participated directly in the public consultations for this historic plan; and having a seat on the Poverty Reduction Advisory Committee was crucial for advancing the input and expertise of public sector workers,” said Smith.

TogetherBC: British Columbia’s Poverty Reduction Strategy gives the province a meaningful framework for reducing and preventing systemic poverty. It incorporates a combination of new and previously announced actions that span housing, child care, education, employment, health, transportation, access to justice and food security.

“There’s a wide number of programs and investments that will make life a little easier for British Columbians, including for those who need it most.”
British Columbia has become a haven for criminal money laundering over the past number of years. Expert studies estimate that as many as seven billion dollars were laundered through casinos, real estate and luxury cars in 2018.

The fallout includes skyrocketing housing costs, and tainted drugs on our streets. This, in turn, has produced an overdose crisis so grave it’s caused a decline in B.C.’s average life expectancy.

The current provincial government has already enacted a number of positive measures to address the problems. But, the severity of this crisis demanded more be done.

Police investigations have been piecemeal and the government reports from earlier in the year only scratched the surface of a much broader problem.

On May 14th, the government launched a public inquiry. Now we can finally get to the truth. No one and no sector of the economy has been spared from the crisis.

BCGEU members working in health care, social services, libraries, and transit, along with deputy sheriffs, probation officers and correctional officers, are the first responders on the frontlines of the overdose crisis. Some have watched long-time clients and friends die in their arms. This didn’t have to happen.

The BCGEU represents several thousand members who work in casinos.

They were among the first to sound the alarm about money laundering through casinos.

Money laundering has also inflated B.C. housing prices to a crisis point. Housing affordability is the number one issue identified by BCGEU members and no wage gains negotiated through collective bargaining could begin to address this problem.

The BCGEU recently launched a campaign calling on the provincial government to initiate a public inquiry into the links between the overdose crisis, housing affordability and money laundering.

Nearly 7000 people added their names to the call, in the lead up to government calling an inquiry.

“Our union has been working hard to support members as they face the challenges of both the overdose and housing crises,” said BCGEU president Stephanie Smith.

“A comprehensive public inquiry is the best way to get to the bottom of how these crises are connected, to make sure those who are responsible are held accountable and that the rest of us are protected going forward.”

A recent BCGEU-commissioned public opinion poll showed that over 75 per cent of British Columbians want a public inquiry, and 87 per cent would consider this a voting issue if an election were held tomorrow.

By the time the government called an inquiry the cities of Richmond, Victoria, Vancouver, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, BC Federation of Labour, BC Teachers Federation, Vancouver District Labour Council, Fraser Valley Labour Council and the BC Green Party all joined the call for a public inquiry.

Our campaign shifted the conversation and created the political conditions for an inquiry to be called.
The BCGEU has been walking the talk on reconciliation for many years. Our work was in high gear in 2018. It was a year where we engaged with grassroots activists, our members and community organizations to add their voices to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

Many of our actions have been driven by resolutions brought forward by BCGEU delegates, at the 2017 convention.

In December, BCGEU president Stephanie Smith presented to the inquiry’s commissioners in Ottawa. We’re the only union in Canada to be granted legal standing at the inquiry.

“The commissioners had heard countless hours of testimony by the time I got to the podium in December,” said Smith. “But our members’ perspectives and stories were unique. One commissioner thanked the BCGEU for making sure the Inquiry heard from workers. And one of the elders, in her closing prayer the day of our submission, spoke with tears in her eyes about how she could now look out and see that there were non-Indigenous people working hard to help. BCGEU members’ recommendations made a real impact. I was humbled to carry their message to Ottawa.”

Throughout 2018, we developed the report that would be the basis of our submission using a process that brought BCGEU members together from around B.C. We also kept an open dialogue with a coalition of groups and supported them in the challenges they faced in their efforts to submit the most comprehensive reports possible.

We stood in solidarity with our allies and friends in calling for an extension of deadlines to allow more voices to be heard. The commitment, persistence and resilience of everyone was an inspiration.

Our date with the inquiry in December in Ottawa was the end of this phase of the process: our chance to weigh-in on this national tragedy.

The stories we conveyed on behalf of our members were a powerful reminder of our painful shared history, and the hard work the BCGEU is doing as we move toward a better future.

“I left Ottawa with hope for the future and a strong resolve that our union must continue working to overcome the devastating impacts of colonization and to raise up our Indigenous brothers, sisters, families and friends,” Smith said.

The inquiry commissioners were scheduled on June 3 to deliver their final recommendations to all levels of government and Canadians at a public ceremony in Ottawa. There’s a lot more for us to do. We’re continuing to do the hard work of reconciliation.

This includes building partnerships with Indigenous organizations, supporting culturally appropriate programs and closing the gap in support services for Indigenous women and girls.

We’re a union committed to social justice. It was BCGEU members who urged us to seek legal standing at the inquiry. You guided the process every step of the way.

Together, we’re working to create a more just society where all people are treated with dignity, respect and fairness.
Almost every participant described a situation where they felt at physical or emotional risk while working with clients in group homes, facilities and private homes.

The toll that violence takes has deep implications, not only for the worker but also for the broader community. Being hurt on the job leads to higher incidents of burnout, stress, and anxiety. This results in staff shortages, high staff turnover, and a workforce that’s unable to grow and thrive to meet the needs of its clients, who are some of our most vulnerable citizens. We all lose when caring professionals feel un cared for.

Participants also spoke about their hopes and dreams for the community living sector. They’re putting their faith in a future where workers and clients are treated with dignity and respect.

Young workers said they were excited to bring the very best service to clients and their families. We also heard from workers nearing retirement who told us they look forward to supporting the next generation of workers with empathy and compassion.

By the end of the forum, all participants had come together in solidarity and support for their fellow BCGEU members. They challenged each other to speak up and speak out, to get engaged in occupational health and safety committees, and to speak their truth to better fight for members’ rights.

Violence in the workplace is a tough reality for too many workers and it’s not part of anyone’s job description. Our forum confirmed there’s a long road to travel to turn the tide on this issue and the only way to travel down this road is in solidarity.
Community social services are the heart of our communities

Women fleeing violence in need of safety and support. Families and children with special needs. Indigenous communities seeking services in their own language that honours their culture.

These are just a few of the British Columbians that turn to the caring professionals who provide community social services.

Thousands of BCGEU members work in community social services, making it one of the largest components in the union. They bring their skills to workplaces such as community living facilities, family and child centres, transition housing, addictions counselling centres, Indigenous services and women’s centres.

“The caring professionals in community social services dedicate their lives to ensuring that our most vulnerable citizens are safe and cared for and are the unsung heroes of our province. Their commitment and service help people live better lives and build stronger communities,” said Andrea Duncan, vice-president of BCGEU’s community and social services component.

This spring, Duncan, along with the elected bargaining committee, visited many communities where our members work in Indigenous services. They stopped in Vancouver, Prince Rupert, Terrace, Kamloops, and Haida Gwaii and met with members whose responsibilities range from child protection and support for youth to keeping families together.

Duncan was keen to learn from members what is working, how better to engage them and how to support the membership in making positive change in their workplaces.

Government commitments to poverty reduction, Indigenous language revitalization, and affordable child care represent vital steps forward for community social service workers and the communities they serve.

Our union is doing its part too. At the bargaining table recently, we made significant gains in the last round of collective bargaining, including a well-deserved bump in wages and low-wage redress in recognition of many years of stagnant wages for this sector. But, there’s still much work to do.

Years of underfunding of community social services have left many doing too much with too little. We will continue to urge government to make the sector a funding priority so that dedicated workers who provide supports to our most vulnerable will have the resources they need.

There isn’t a family in British Columbia that hasn’t been touched by a community social services professional.

Let’s continue to celebrate the unsung heroes who are the heart of our communities.
British Columbia has been leading the way when it comes to the responsible and safe distribution of cannabis. The modern online store in our province was one of the few able to support the big wave of traffic on the day cannabis was legalized across Canada last October. BCGEU members helped make that happen.

“Responsible retail of recreational cannabis by professional BCGEU members at BC Cannabis Stores ensures that cannabis stays out of the hands of minors, while providing a world-class retail experience for consumers,” said BCGEU president Stephanie Smith.

Thanks to the many new and current BCGEU members in our retail stores and warehouse sector (component 5), the provincial distribution system for the online BC Cannabis Store was able to hit the ground running smoothly and efficiently.

With union members handling all aspects of processing, packaging, and delivery to Canada Post, B.C. is also leading the way in the industry when it comes to job creation and public benefits.

With only 18 licensed stores, already British Columbians purchased roughly $6.5 million worth of legal cannabis through our public owned and operated distribution networks. Nine new brick and mortar BC Cannabis Stores are set to open in the coming months, and that will create a considerable economic opportunity. We’re excited to see how British Columbians will benefit from these revenues in upcoming budgets.

“Legal, recreational cannabis has the potential to be a major driver of economic growth and direct monetary benefit to the province,” said Smith. “Wise investments in the regulation, sale, and distribution of alcohol provide billions in direct benefit to British Columbians, and we can expect the new cannabis industry to further subsidize government’s ability to invest in services like health, education, and seniors’ care.”


The good news is these jobs will be family supporting. There are currently nearly 5,000 BCGEU members employed in the Liquor Distribution Branch. This number will rise as the cannabis industry develops.

Those interested in employment in the public cannabis stores should visit www.bcldbcannabisupdates.com/opportunities/careers to find out more about the opportunities in one of British Columbia’s fastest growing new industries.

Applications can also be made through the BC government job portal at: www.gov.bc.ca/myhr/employment

With union members handling all aspects of processing, packaging, and delivery to Canada Post, B.C. is also leading the way in the industry when it comes to job creation and public benefits.

Already a major job creator in the province, the Liquor Distribution Branch’s cannabis division has also been staffing up considerably. With the launch of more brick and mortar BC Cannabis Stores across the province they’ll need to recruit many more workers.

Shop Public with BC Cannabis Stores

We’ve heard about British Columbia’s real estate market no longer being “red hot.” But, a price drop from $1,605,800 to $1,479,000 for a typical single-family home doesn’t offer much hope to those being squeezed by the housing affordability crisis.

In 2018, all levels of governments began to take steps to fix the problem. Some improvements were made.

The most promising step came just before the end of 2018 when the City of Vancouver voted to study how a Land Value Capture (LVC) — a tax policy idea that’s gaining momentum — could help address the crisis.

An LVC is a tax on speculation directed at landowners making windfall profits from skyrocketing land prices. It’s different from the school tax implemented by the provincial government last summer, which taxes all residential properties above a certain value.

Instead, LVC targets owners whose land value increased due to rezoning or major infrastructure projects paid for by public dollars. It taxes a portion of this land lift.

“Let’s say a piece of real estate is vacant and is worth $100 million. A new SkyTrain station is built next door, and the land is rezoned for higher density so more people can access the new transit line,” said BCGEU treasurer Paul Finch.

“Overnight, the value of the property increases to $400 million because of its location and the rezoning, resulting in a $300 million profit. You then have to ask yourself, why is the landowner the only one who benefits, when millions of taxpayer dollars also went into creating this increase in land value?”

That’s why the union launched the AffordableBC campaign to start to influence public policy in an effort to address the underlying issues that make B.C. such an expensive place to live, said Finch.

The union has undertaken extensive research and campaigning on the housing crisis, including consultation with renowned American economist Dr. Michael Hudson and union leaders Jared Melvin and Harpinder Sandhu from CUPE 1767, who represent workers at the BC Assessment Authority.

Key elements of the provincial and municipal versions of the AffordableBC plan have now been adopted and endorsed by several municipal politicians in the Lower Mainland and Victoria.

“I hear from BCGEU members that affordability is the number one concern for them, and housing makes up the majority of this burden. That’s why the union launched the AffordableBC campaign to start to influence public policy in an effort to address the underlying issues that make B.C. such an expensive place to live,” Finch.

An LVC would generate significant revenue for transit projects, other public amenities and most importantly, subsidize affordable housing by helping more projects get off the ground.

As well, investors would have to factor the LVC into their project budget. This would help limit speculation in the market and stabilize prices over time.

“Only then can we return to the kind of stability where businesses can attract employees living nearby, students can afford to pay for school and rent, young families can stay in their communities and the elderly can age in place.”

It’s time for smarter solutions to B.C.’s housing crisis. You can learn more about the Affordable BC plan at www.affordablebc.ca
When Ellen Nicholson and her co-workers Diane Lane and Michelle Tott headed to Harrison Hot Springs in February, they weren’t going for a vacation. All three work at the BC Liquor Store in Prince George’s Pine Centre shopping mall. They came to find a way to build power in their workplace, to tackle issues their co-workers care about — such as fairness, scheduling and bullying.

That week, the trio joined 27 other local leaders at the final offering of the union’s very first Organizing Academy. The five-day course presented a deep dive into organizing skills and how stewards and local leaders can apply them to get results.

“I told them that showing a unified front and standing together was going to be the only way they were going to get what they needed. Now, we have a new schedule that’s fairer. We did it together.”

As soon as they were back at work, Nicholson and colleagues put their new skills into practice. Their first challenge was to move BCGEU members from fear of acting on their own to realizing that, together, they had more power.

“I told them that showing a unified front and standing together was going to be the only way they were going to get what they needed,” Nicholson said. “Now, we have a new schedule that’s fairer. We did it together.”

More than 113 BCGEU members attended this intensive weeklong course that was offered over four weeks at the CLC winter school. They learned and practiced skills to build power in their workplaces and take collective action. Now, the newly minted leaders are working on projects with coaching from each other and BCGEU staff.

“We are building a community of organizers,” said president Stephanie Smith.

Meet some of the worker organizers:

**Tennille Penner, Local 712**

Program support clerk, Northern Lights College, Fort St. John campus

Organizing insight: Face-to-face conversations with members are critical.

Organizing project: Making collective bargaining more open and transparent with more members involved.

Next step: Working with bargaining committee to social map our workplace and develop a communication plan.

**Ayesha Khan, Local 704**

Constituency assistant, Surrey-Guildford MLA’s constituency office

Organizing insight: It’s so valuable to analyse power by creating a power map.

Organizing project: Tackling understaffing and violence in the workplace.

Next step: Organize a button-up campaign.

**Jessica Scafe, Local 712**

Student recruitment coordinator, Coast Mountain College

Organizing insight: You can start small! We started a lunch time booth to engage members and encourage them to fill out their bargaining survey.

Organizing project: Preparing for bargaining.

Next step: Get all 200+ members at my worksite to complete bargaining surveys and then move to other worksites.

**Matt Robinson, Local 501**

Sales associate, Cedar Hill liquor store in Victoria

Organizing insight: It helped me understand the stages of an organizing campaign.

Organizing project: Planning a member-to-member campaign for our local.

Next step: Worksite visits to hear from members.
A DAY WITHOUT ADMIN: Celebrating the unsung administrative superstars of the workplace

They’re a key piece of the workplace puzzle, but sometimes feel invisible and undervalued. Yet, administrative services workers are often the glue that holds offices together.

They’re the colleagues who make things hum. They will stop what they’re doing at the drop of a hat to help out others. Workplaces wouldn’t function without them.

That’s why we’re recognizing and celebrating them with a new campaign for 2019 called, A Day Without Admin. It launched during Administrative Professionals’ Week in late April.

Imagine what a day in your workplace would look like without administrative services staff. It would be like a missing piece of a puzzle. Important tasks wouldn’t get done. Productivity would fall. It wouldn’t be too long in the day before colleagues, managers and the public would begin to feel the impact — lost without the problem-solvers and innovators in their office.

The people who make extraordinary efforts to get the job done.

Our campaign is focused on the professionalism and dedication of administrative services workers. We’re using the BCGEU’s social media channels, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Instagram to introduce you to the unsung admin superstars within our ranks.

“We Our A Day Without Admin campaign is meant to broaden awareness about the valued work of administrative services staff. We’re professionals and we deserve recognition for our efforts and dedication.”

Here’s where all BCGEU members can play a role in our campaign. We want to hear your story of what a day without administrative services would look like in your workplace. What effect would it have? What key tasks wouldn’t get done? How would the services you offer suffer? Post it at adaywithoutadmin.ca.

The BCGEU represents more than 12,000 administrative services workers in a broad range of jobs within government ministries and through independent employers, such as health care, education, community health and social services.

You’d be surprised at the number of different jobs our members do. Here’s a partial list of positions: administrative officer, coordinator of volunteers, analyst, court clerk, financial officer, health unit aide, data processing operator, switchboard operator and stock worker.

“Our members perform at the highest level despite enormous challenges,” said BCGEU administrative services vice-president Maria Middlemiss. “Our A Day Without Admin campaign is meant to broaden awareness about the valued work of administrative services staff. We’re professionals and we deserve recognition for our efforts and dedication.”

There are no easy days in the life of an administrative services worker. They’re often made to cover for each other because employers won’t backfill vacation time or hire additional staff. Their days are long and the work is never-ending. Much is demanded of them.

The A Day Without Admin campaign is a continuation of two other successful campaigns we’ve conducted in the last four years to recognize our members who work in administrative services. Breakaway in 2015 and Unsung Superstars in 2017 were well received by BCGEU members, some of whom contacted us to nominate their colleagues for special honours.

We’re nowhere near done celebrating administrative services workers. Share your story of a day without admin at adaywithoutadmin.ca.
Did you know that 22 per cent of adult Canadians have at least one disability? That’s according to a 2017 survey by Statistics Canada and amounts to roughly 6.8 million people. When it comes to participation in the paid workforce, only 59 per cent of people with disabilities take home a paycheque — an employment rate that’s 21 per cent lower than workers without disabilities. Even those with jobs face barriers and challenges.

The needs and wants of workers with disabilities was the subject of a recent roundtable forum held at the BCGEU headquarters in April. Twenty-four members with lifelong and acquired, permanent and episodic, visible and invisible disabilities joined the two-day dialogue.

The consultation event was mandated by a resolution passed at the BCGEU convention in 2017. Additional roundtables for workers of colour and Indigenous workers are planned for later this year.

BCGEU president Stephanie Smith launched the forum. She told participants the union is committed to building inclusive workplaces, communities and a union that will honour and be responsive to the voices and experiences of workers with disabilities. This reflects the “nothing about us, without us” theme of the roundtable.

Participants took the opportunity to share their stories and experiences and generated many ideas about advancing awareness and inclusion within workplaces and our union. Some raised accessibility and accommodation issues at union events and offices. One participant, who’s deaf, wasn’t able to take part in a telephone town hall about her collective agreement settlement.

“Don’t know whether America Sign Language interpretive services would be available at a union meeting either,” she said.

Other participants pointed to shortcomings in health and welfare benefits and bureaucratic red tape to verify disability-related absences.

“I loved that people doing the work were all living with disability in some way, and can speak with authority about what is needed in their particular workplaces,” one participant said.

Guest speaker Sheryl Burns, of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), shared her own story of growing up with a hearing disability and facing barriers to education and work.

With the encouragement of a supportive employer and her union, Burns persevered, becoming a strong advocate for others. She’s now president of CUPE Local 1936 and also represents workers with disabilities on the BC Federation of Labour executive council.

BCGEU treasurer Paul Finch credits his colleagues and mentors for supporting him as a person on the autism spectrum. Now, as a leader in the labour movement, he’s in a position to make positive change.

“I’m really looking forward to the report and recommendations,” Finch said. “We’ve got work to do to ensure members with disabilities are heard, included and reflected in everything we do. Nothing about us, without us.”

A proposed action plan was created to cover public policy advocacy, internal union policies, union structure and governance, and collective bargaining. A comprehensive report with recommendations will be presented later this year to the BCGEU’s provincial executive for consideration.
Together, we can have positive impacts. Solidarity means mutual support and unity. We hope you will consider investigating the steps necessary to become a live organ donor. Some employers provide paid time off during the transplant recovery period.

Besides giving birth to my child, it was probably the most amazing thing I have ever done. It gave my cousin an extra three years of life. He was able to watch his son graduate from high school. He got to do things he needed to do and wanted to do as a dad and a husband,” Skidmore said.

The BCGEU membership also includes organ recipients. Member Kurt Langdon is an equipment operator with the City of Fort St John. Being Type 1 diabetic for more than 40 years caused his kidney function to decline. When his sister was ruled out as a donor, he was placed on the deceased donor list.

One month later, in September 2018, he received a kidney transplant and returned to work in January 2019. To say it was a life-changing experience for him is an understatement.

“You can’t imagine how someone that receives a donated organ appreciates it. You will change so many lives being a donor,” Langdon said. “Writing the letter to the donor’s family was hard. It’s difficult to express enough feeling to let the donor’s family know that they’ve positively affected my life, my family’s life, my friends’ lives and the entire community.”

Together, we can have positive impacts. Solidarity means mutual support and unity. We hope you will consider investigating the steps necessary to become a live organ donor. Some employers provide paid time off during the transplant recovery period. You can learn more about becoming a donor by visiting the BC Transplant website at www.transplant.bc.ca.
Our support for workers doesn’t stop at the B.C. border. In December, two BCGEU activists participated in a multi-union delegation to visit communities in the Philippines. The purpose was to see our international solidarity work on the ground and support organizers.

Executive vice-president Kari Michaels, local 702 young worker representative Jessica Humphries, and coordinator of organizing Laarni de los Reyes spent 10 days in the Philippines.

The delegation met with more than two dozen community organizers in seven different communities during the course of the trip. Many of them are supported directly by the BCGEU Diane L. Wood International Solidarity Fund through our Filipino partner agencies.

It was an intense combination of travelling, meetings, heartfelt testimony, and cultural events. Our BCGEU activists returned with new insights into the connections between work in the Philippines and the work we do here. We were also pleased to learn that BCGEU partner agencies continue to make progress, despite martial law, on the war on drugs and the suppression of organizing.

In one community, Limay, local activists were fighting a coal plant that was causing serious illness in the surrounding area. The Canadian delegation wore facemasks to filter out the coal dust, but residents didn’t wear any protection. We were told that cases of rashes and respiratory illnesses were widespread in adults and children. The situation is tense between the government and the company. One activist has already been assassinated and another died from complications related to the coal ash shortly after our group visited.

Despite these obstacles, community organizers continue to push local government to shut down the plant. "Through the sharing of work done against coal pollution in Canada, there was a sense of validation. Everything they knew to be true could be backed up by years of research members of the Canadian delegation shared," said Jessica Humphries.

Having a chance to exchange with Filipino organizers was very meaningful to Kari Michaels. "We met people who are so committed to their end goal, and they are really determined to build power in their community. Organizers do so much with so little there," she said.

In the village of Subic Bay, our delegation met with workers at Hanjin Shipyard and was impressed by the organizing work being done.

"The organizers brought a level of respect and connectedness that we sometimes forget in our formal organizing work," said Humphries. "The young workers were so articulate and understood the issues — they’re already speaking with the voice of an elder. We need to maintain these relationships to continue supporting their work."

"The trip made me realize we have to look at the systemic ways we’re benefitting from the global economy," said Michaels. "We need to think about how we are complicit, from the temporary foreign worker program, to sending our garbage to other countries, to offshore call centres. The BCGEU must continue to deepen our work to be transformative, not transactional."

INTERATIONAL SOLIDARITY: meeting labour organizers in the Philippines
Retiring from work doesn’t have to mean giving up your connection to B.C.’s labour movement. There’s no reason to withdraw from activist work or stop caring about the social justice issues that matter to many of our members. Labour needs the skills, experience and breadth of knowledge retirees bring to the table. Two organizations can help you stay involved — the British Columbia Government Retired Employees’ Association and BC FORUM.

The British Columbia Government Retired Employees’ Association (BCGREA) provides public service retirees additional health, travel and insurance benefits. But that’s not all. Membership gives you a voice at the table as well when it comes to making sure benefits under the BC Pension Corporation are protected and improved.

With a membership of 9,000 across the province you’ll have the opportunity to meet other retirees through volunteering, social activities, tours and outings. Having trouble wading through the complexities of applying for pension benefits? Members from 22 branch offices in B.C. can provide new retirees with assistance and introduce them to appropriate local services.

We asked Al Barclay, BCGREA provincial membership secretary, for more information:

**Who can become a member?**

Individuals receiving a pension administered by the BC Pension Corporation and their spouses are eligible to become either active members (those receiving a pension from the Public Service Pension Plan (PSPP)) or affiliate members (those receiving a pension from other than the PSPP).

**What are the benefits?**

A principle benefit is having a representative on the pension plan board of trustees as well as optional extended health and dental coverage, discount hotel rates and group rates on life, travel and home insurance, discounts on hearing aids and travel packages.

**How much does it cost?**

Members pay $20 per individual or $40 per couple in dues annually.

The BCGEU has a long history of supporting the work of the BCGREA. In 1974, our union was instrumental in the association’s success in getting the provincial government to tie pension increases to the cost of living index. This was an important victory for members and our union.

To find out more, go to BCGREA’s website: www.bcgrea.ca call 250-751-8814 or send an email to bcgrea@telus.net. Application forms are available on the website.

**BC FORUM – the voice of senior trade unionists**

BC FORUM represents thousands of retired and active workers aged 50 or better from unions affiliated to the BC Federation of Labour. The organization champions seniors’ issues such as access to home support and assisted living services, retirement income security, and safe and affordable prescription drugs. With members sitting as delegates on labour councils across B.C., BC FORUM also supports solidarity by alerting members about picket lines, demonstrations and government initiatives.

Each member of BC FORUM also enjoys significant benefits through a group benefit plan that includes access to extended health and dental benefit programs. With an increasingly precarious job market, and with some workers unable to qualify for benefits, access to a group plan is more important than ever.

If you are newly retiring, the BCGEU will pay for your first year of membership with BC FORUM.

To join, renew a membership or for more information, visit www.bcforum.ca.
Coming this spring

STEP UP

Start with STEP UP, our new introductory course open to all members.

STEP UP explores our common values, union culture, principles and a bit of labour history.