

Richmond News

Striking disability staff walk out; Community service workers getting paid a dollar per hour less than 11 years ago

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Illustrations: Ch U N G Ch O W, Ri C H M O N D Ne W S / Developmental Disabilities Association strikes on Shell Road in Richmond. Director Alanna Hendren is in support of the striking community living workers.;

Dozens of community social services workers, many from the Developmental Disabilities Association (DDA), went on a one-day strike Wednesday morning outside the DDA head office on Shell Road.

DDA executive director Alanna Hendren was present and spoke to media and workers about the starting wages that are \$15.54 an hour, down from \$16.83 in 2002.

"During a time when the cost of living has increased by 18 per cent, this has to change," said Hendren who added her and the board of directors have no input into pay levels.

"We have employment specialists at the DDA now making less money than the individuals with developmental disabilities for whom they are finding work,"

The association provides a variety of services for people with learning disabilities of all ages such as infant development programs, childcare and educational programs and community housing for adults with complex medical and psychological needs.

Oliver Rohlfs - B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union's communications officer, of which the DDA belongs to - said the strike had minimal

effects on those using the services. "The challenge is you have

to balance the needs of the clients," he said.

"We guarantee essential service levels so the health, safety and welfare of the clients aren't impacted but that also means we're very reticent to take everybody out in one go.

"So we're stuck between a rock and a hard place. How much is enough pressure to make the government and employers budge?"

Besides the BCGEU - that also encompasses not-for-profit organizations with non-government workers like the DDA - there were also representatives from the Hospital Employees' Union, Health Sciences Association of BC and the Canadian Union of Public Employees and others.

The strange thing about this particular strike was that employers were supporting the picket line, said Patsy Harmston, chairwoman of the Community Social Services Bargaining Association.

"We're trying to make a statement trying to let the people of the province know what it is and who we are because we're often

confused for government workers or somebody else.

"What we really want is to get back to the table and get an agreement," she said.

The current agreement ended last March and talks started in February of 2012 with no monetary offer yet made.

A total of 3,400 workers participated in the job action that also took place in Chilliwack, Vancouver, Burnaby and Prince George on Wednesday, as well as Victoria, Kelowna and Kamloops on Thursday.