

## **BARGAINING: CHANGES TO EI**

### **EI changes: Bargaining implications for maternity, parental and STD plans**

Changes are coming to Canada's Employment Insurance program, and this means CUPE locals will need to get ready to bargain changes to maternity, parental and short-term disability (STD) plans.

The Liberal government has reduced the wait time for applicants to receive EI benefits, from two weeks to one week. This change applies to all benefits including regular, special (maternity, parental and sickness), as well as workers in the fishing industry.

CUPE members whose collective agreements provide supplemental unemployment benefit (SUB) plans and top-ups to maternity, parental, sick leave and short-term disability may be affected. Unlike most other employer payments that are clawed back from EI, claimants covered by SUB and top-up plans can earn a maximum of 95 per cent of normal weekly earnings. For maternity and other top-up plans, the amount is 100 per cent. Maternity and parental benefits in Quebec, which are provincially administered, are not affected.

To avoid claw-backs to negotiated SUBS and top-ups, the federal

government has allowed a four-year "transition period" that will end on January 3, 2021. The transition period will give unions and the employers an opportunity to amend negotiated SUBS and top-ups to avoid claw-backs when income exceeds the allowable limits.

For example, a negotiated payment to cover the second week of the waiting period might exceed the 100 per cent threshold, as it combines normal weekly earnings as well as the first EI payment. In such a case, the employer and union could agree to move the payment to the end of the EI claim, or spread the payment over the duration of the benefit period, to avoid a claw-back.

The transition period also allows the union and employer to work with third-party insurance providers to amend their plans. For example, EI-approved short-term disability and other sick plans give employers a break by lowering their EI premiums until the plan begins. In 2021, the reduced premium rate will be reduced from 14 to seven days. The added cost may prompt some employers to ask for changes to their plans.

During the transition period, the usual maximum of 95 to 100 per cent

of normal weekly earnings may be exceeded without penalty. After January 3, 2021, all plans must comply to continue to qualify for special treatment under the EI Act.

Local unions with negotiated SUBS, STD, sick leave plans and top-ups should take immediate steps to assess the impact of the new rules on their members and identify what type of changes require discussion with the employer.

The reduced waiting period is part of a wider basket of reforms to the EI program, but much more is needed. CUPE members, especially those who are precariously and seasonally employed, depend on EI to stabilize their income. CUPE supports the Canadian Labour Congress's call to extend benefit coverage and reduce the qualifying period to 360 hours especially in regions with high unemployment. (Qualifying hours depends on your region's unemployment rate, and ranges from 420 to 700 hours worked per 52 weeks). Maternity, paternity and parental benefits also need major improvements. The Quebec Parental Insurance Plan provides greater flexibility to parents along with higher benefit rates and extended coverage. Similar improvements in the federal program are long overdue.

Finally, we encourage the federal government to improve service by hiring more front-line staff to assist claimants to access their benefits in a timely way.

■ **Janet Dassinger**

## **INSIDE**

**2 STRATEGIES**  
Why social media is not enough

**3 BARGAINING**  
Before the Bargaining Table: How Local 387 made gains for precarious workers

**4 CAMPAIGN**  
Quality Jobs, Quality Education, Better Futures

# Why social media is not enough



No matter the challenge, community is the answer. That's why unions and other organizations are rediscovering established techniques of building community – like fostering the skills to improve face-to-face communication, even in the age of digital technology and social media.

Most of us remember a time when we learned about our world largely through the one-way filter of mass media, when interaction was limited to letters to the editor or AM radio call-in shows.

We've seen a lot of change in the past ten years or so, including the rise of social media giants such as Facebook and the widespread use of websites and blogs. And true enough, we seem to have more influence and capacity to share information with each other.

But we can also see at least three negative sides to an over-reliance on social media:

1. People increasingly self-select what kind of information they receive. They are now finding themselves

trapped in echo chambers, with social media feeds that are mostly populated by ideas from like-minded people. It's getting harder to hear or read different points of view.

2. Mainstream media has, broadly speaking, always reflected the values and interests of dominant sectors of our society. But today, we seem to be stuck in a world of fake news and alternative facts as people share information that is increasingly not fact-checked. Truth is becoming more elusive. Opinions masquerade as reality. People appear less capable of critical thinking.
3. Compounding the first two problems, people are feeling more alienated from each other. People embraced social media as a way of keeping in touch with friends and families, and maybe for some activism. But lately, people are backing away from social media because it is becoming an inadequate replacement for authentic human connection.

## HOW DO WE COMBAT THIS SOCIAL MEDIA ALIENATION?

We connect with each other – face-to-face. We rely less on paid advertising in the mass media to reach our members and the public. We spend more face-to-face time with our members and develop more authentic relationships – and we don't rely on a Facebook post, a tweet, an ad or a robocall.

Building face-to-face capacity is an ongoing process. We can't do it just in the weeks before a round of bargaining or a strike vote. To have a powerful effect in our workplaces we need to constantly deepen relationships with our members. We need to understand our members, so that we can have their backs. And when they see that we do, we will be able to count on their support for our collective bargaining goals.

■ **Stephen Elliott-Buckley**

Tabletalk is published four times a year to provide CUPE bargaining committees and servicing representatives with useful information for preparing and negotiating bargaining demands.

Find past issues of Tabletalk online at [cupe.ca/tabletalk](http://cupe.ca/tabletalk)

An email edition of Tabletalk is available. Subscribe at [cupe.ca/subscribe](http://cupe.ca/subscribe)

Please email [research@cupe.ca](mailto:research@cupe.ca) with corrections, questions, suggestions, or contributions.



**CUPE** / Canadian Union  
of Public Employees

# Before the Bargaining Table: How Local 387 made gains for precarious workers

As a researcher, I regularly read the agreements that come into the office. Sometimes, it makes for encouraging reading – like when I read about the changes negotiated in the latest round of bargaining between CUPE Local 387 and the City of New Westminster in BC.

Their new agreement featured a long list of improvements, including:

- Provisions to reduce the use of seasonal workers by converting workers in that classification to regular full-time employees over two years.
- Benefits for all temporary full-time and temporary part-time workers.
- Two new letters of understanding addressing the issues around the auxiliary workforce and continuing the work to convert those positions to regular part-time and regular full-time.
- Benefit improvements and wage increases.

These would be excellent outcomes in any day, but Local 387 achieved all this in a climate where employers are pushing the use of temporary and seasonal workers and trying to restrict their access to health and benefit plans.

## HOW DID THEY GET THERE?

I sat down with the local to find out how they had bargained these changes. The business agent George Habib and president Hardeep Maghera were happy to share their experiences at the bargaining table and in their local.

They told me that success at the bargaining table starts well before any bargaining takes place and builds on three key pieces.

## KEY #1: BUILD THE LOCAL'S CAPACITY

The first key was to build their own local and its capacity. They have a very strong executive and they work as a team with their business agent. They have invested in education around financial literacy and labour management skills for the whole team, and everyone on the executive has a role to play in the running of the local and representing their members. They have very deliberately built a system where everyone has a purpose and each role is essential.

To the extent possible in a democratic organization, they have also invested time and resources into succession planning. This means identifying members who have the drive and passion to work for the improvement of the local – and engaging them in opportunities for growth such as education, conferences and hands-on experience with the work of the local.

## KEY #2: BUILD RELATIONSHIPS FOR BARGAINING

The second key is building relationships with the people they work with, starting with their CUPE National Staff Representative.

A significant part of this is the local's relationship with their employer, the City of New Westminster. Over the past ten years the local has worked towards creating an environment of respect and trust when working with management and human resources staff at the city. Although they frequently disagree, there is level of respect between the two parties that allows them to come to agreement on many issues.



The relationship with the employer has also changed the tone at labour management meetings. Many of the items that come to the bargaining table are issues that have already been discussed and largely worked out through the labour management process.

Hardeep says this is the secret to their bargaining success. “Bargaining is not to negotiate everything but it is the culmination of all the work done in months and years previous.”

Hardeep says Local 387 got the employer to agree to extending benefits to temporary full-time and temporary part-time workers because of the consistent work and messaging by the local about fairness in benefits during labour management meetings – long before bargaining officially started.

## KEY #3: POLITICAL ACTION

The final key to their bargaining success is political action. Local 387 works hard to communicate the concerns of working people during the electoral process. Currently, every member of the New Westminster Council, including the mayor, is endorsed by the local labour council. The local maintains regular communication with councillors.

Building and maintaining these political relationships is an ongoing process. It is hard work. But it's this kind of work that enables this CUPE local to protect members' rights and build a fairer collective agreement for everyone.

Building the local, building relationships and taking political action – that's how CUPE 387 builds a strong local, and secures better working conditions for its members.

■ **Jordana Feist**



# Quality Jobs, Quality Education, Better Futures



For many years now, precarious work has been on the rise on university and college campuses across the country. A growing number of faculty and support staff are now in part-time, casual, temporary, and contract positions. These positions frequently pay low wages with few to no benefits, and provide workers with no job stability.

Precarity is hard on workers, personally and professionally. Academic workers and support workers are passionately committed to delivering high quality education and services for students, but they need fair and decent working conditions to make that happen. Precarious work hurts post-secondary education twice: it hurts workers, and it diminishes the quality of education that students receive.

That's why CUPE is fighting back. Our campaign Quality Jobs, Quality Education, Better Futures is raising awareness across the country about the

impact that precarious work is having on post-secondary education and sharing stories of resistance from workers.

Our campaign includes town halls across the country to help build alliances with student groups and others to create a powerful counterforce to the prevailing winds of precarious work. We've already held town halls in Guelph, ON, Vancouver, BC, and Sackville, NB. We've heard personal stories of how precarity is affecting people's lives and families. We've heard first-hand of the impact on students. But we've also heard inspiring stories about workers and CUPE locals fighting back against precarity.

These stories will continue to fuel our work in the future, as CUPE makes fighting precarity across sectors a priority.

## HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

- Distribute campaign posters, postcards, buttons and booklets at events on campus or in your community to raise awareness.
- Talk to your colleagues, students, friends and family about the impact of precarious work on workers and on post-secondary education. Download and print our booklet and share it widely.
- Send a message to your local university or college president that you expect them to stop compromising the quality of education by making work so precarious. Download our postcard and send it to your president.

**To learn more or to download or order resources, visit [www.cupe.ca/quality-jobs-quality-education](http://www.cupe.ca/quality-jobs-quality-education).**

■ **Chandra Pasma**