

CUPE Steward Conference  
Vancouver Island  
Sept 30 – October 2, 2010

Over 70 seasoned and new stewards participated in the first-ever Vancouver Island Stewards Conference last weekend. The conference kicked off on September 30 with a welcome event featuring [CUPE BC](#) president Barry O'Neill and guest speaker Murray Langdon, past president of his local at CHEK 6. Louise Oetting, president of the Vancouver Island District Council, introduced the planning committee and reviewed the agenda.

O'Neill spoke about the work CUPE members do across B.C. to keep communities sustainable. He touched on the "Ten Per Cent Shift" campaign that CUPE BC will be launching in the near future. The campaign focuses on how CUPE members can make a difference in generating new revenue streams.

"Sustainable communities come from hard work. I would entrust that to you more than I would entrust it to anyone else I know, said O'Neill. "Stewards are the heart and soul of our union."

### **The leadership component of stewarding**

Guest speaker Murray Langdon shared his experience as the president of a broadcasters' union in Alberta and spoke about the leadership component of stewarding.

Langdon's union had 70 members and one-third of them were stewards. He challenged the audience to examine their structure and ask if they have representation of everyone in the workforce. He said that unions are not about asking for more money and that belonging to a union means being a part of a community.

### **Steward Education Courses**

Education representative Greg Burkitt explained CUPE's new education program, the *Steward Learning Series*. The series includes an introductory course that replaces *Basic, Effective Stewarding* followed by a series of topic-specific modules that replace *Advanced Stewarding*. The Steward Learning Series Passport will allow stewards to track the courses they have taken.

The weekend conference offered four different courses over two days: *Handling Grievances*, *Being an Ally for Equality*, *Building Your Case* and *Resolving Grievances*.

### **Labour Relations Presentations**

An interactive session was held with arbitrator Mark Brown. He shared a number of case studies and asked participants to predict the outcomes. Debbie Cameron from the BC Labour Board gave an overview of the BC Labour Code, Section 12, and the mediation process.

### **Plenary Sessions**

Delegates shared campaigns that locals had done for collective action. They created a plan to engage the membership and take collective action to resolve the issue. Scenarios covered everything from dealing with a bully manager to creating pressure to help an employee with terminal cancer who was terminated.

### **Our personal comments:**

Debbie Chu: Meeting the other stewards and hearing their stories really opened my eyes. The courses were good and informative. I was surprised to hear we need 16 of them to complete our passports. We should encourage all the stewards to go to some and we can talk about them.

Adrienne Else: As I try to sort through (in my mind) all of the loads of information I got out of the conference I think the main thing I took away with me was a renewed appreciation and acknowledgment of what being a part of a union means. I think I sometimes take for granted the day-to-day benefits and rights I have as a union member...the conference reminded me that all of these benefits and rights have

been negotiated for me by my union! Another thing that was emphasized for me was the hard work, awareness and caring (unselfishly) that goes into the work of the union. I've always appreciated the work that my CUPE 410 executive does and the conference highlighted for me the impact of union work and its influence on community and life in general.

Aaron Thom: The conference gave me practice, perspective, and Section 12. We were given the opportunity to role-play a grievance and to engage in brainstorming for job actions. I sat beside a serious negotiator. I saw job actions devised rapidly and described eloquently: creative, hilarious, convincing. I saw chairs turned into a bus, ideas turned into action, and loose groups turned into collectives. Perspective came from both lecturers and colleagues. A mediator's speech established that her priorities are not our priorities. Our goal is the best deal for our membership; her goal is an economically stable province. Brothers and sisters shared stories of tactics, defeats, and victories. Some stories told what could be gained or lost through the right phrases on the right forms: "without precedent or prejudice", "and any other redress the arbitrator deems appropriate". In another story, Victoria Parks employees left work, after turning the sprinklers on. The T-C quipped "Water Runs While Workers Walk. Section 12 caught my attention--another way the mediator altered my viewpoint. By law, under Section 12 of the Labour Relations Code, stewards owe the membership fair representation. "A union cannot act in bad faith or in an arbitrary or discriminatory fashion". We do not have to pursue every grievance to the utter end, but every grievance must be taken seriously. The people at the conference altered the context of my stewardship. I have been told my obligations. I have heard how mediators and arbitrators view our work. I heard shared experiences that might be applicable for us."

Sharon Young: Courses: I really feel the concept of the Steward's Passport is very useful. It identifies the foundation courses for unions and stewards that are needed to be an effective Steward and then offers others to broaden our awareness and effectiveness. Even though there is criticism that the courses are short, and some better than others, they introduce you to the subject so you then understand what a course will be about when offered in depth at future training sessions. And finally it records for the Union and stewards all training taken by that individual. One excellent course gave every group the same scenario to argue. You were either in one of the Management or Union groups. The effectiveness of this was that everyone was familiar with the scenario and it made for lively conversation at the conference and the drive back.

Labour Relations Presentations: The intricacies of the law presented were very enlightening and they served to underline the importance of the steward as every action that comes before them is based on that steward's first handwritten notes. Also it was very clear that Debbie Cameron of the B.C. Labour Board carries a strong pro Management bias.

Plenary Sessions: In these sessions inexperienced Steward's worked with experienced Stewards on how to use small and/or isolated actions to create pressure to solve small or lingering issues. An example given was of a verbally abusive boss that was not taking the complaints about his behavior seriously. The action involved everyone wearing pink to work to illustrate the solidarity felt by employees about his business conduct. He had to admit that it was not just one or two overly sensitive people and changed his conduct accordingly. I feel this could be very useful to use in 2011 as it is both a negotiating and municipal election year. We could choose issues to highlight without work stoppages or disruptions or discipline to our members.

Networking: I was able to meet Stewards from VIRL who have been facing an antagonist management. They have had 400 grievances in the last 4 years. When the settlement was pro Union Management continued in the grieved practice. It is very illustrative of why we were so effective in our strike actions. VIRL has Librarians in one union and Non-professional staff in another. They are playing one against the other. Very poisonous atmosphere. It was also interesting to talk with other Stewards on the way their Union interprets concepts like Duty to Accommodate and how they view, approach and handle these issues.

Thank you for sending me.

