WHAT DO WE TAKE AWAY FROM THE BCGEU STRIKE?

Introduction

On October 26, 2025, the BC General Employees' Union (BCGEU) announced that it had reached a tentative collective agreement with the provincial government, bringing to a close eight weeks of job action involving approximately 25,000 public-sector workers represented by the BCGEU and BC's Union of Professionals (PEA)—although the latter has yet to reach an agreement with the province at time of writing.

The FSA has already discussed the wage and policy implications of this agreement for our own members. See the Bargaining Updates section of our website for more. Yet the significance of the strike extends well beyond the specific terms of the yet-to-be-ratified collective agreement. There are broader lessons to be taken from the strike than what can be found in the pages of a collective agreement. It demonstrates the power working people hold—independent of any political party—to achieve gains at the bargaining table that are by no means freely given.

Legislative and Bureaucratic Context

In this province, the government of the day intervenes in public-sector negotiations. The erosion of independent and equitable collective bargaining for public-sector workers in British Columbia can be traced to at least 1993, with the creation of the Public Sector Employers' Council (PSEC) under the Public Sector Employers Act. In practice, PSEC coordinates the provincial government's compensation mandate, ensuring that all unionized public-sector workers receive essentially equivalent wage settlements.

Since the establishment of this centralized framework under the Mike Harcourt NDP government, public-sector bargaining in British Columbia has been tightly constrained. Negotiations between unions and employers have been effectively subordinated to fiscal and policy parameters defined by central agencies—specifically PSEC, directed by the province, and, within the post-secondary sector, the Post-Secondary Employers' Association (PSEA)—though modified when unions push back. These agencies attempt to define the financial boundaries within which negotiations must occur, severely limiting the potential for genuine, independent collective bargaining. More so than in most other Canadian jurisdictions, British Columbia's government has, for over three decades, determined the content of its public-sector workers' collective agreements.

Analysis: Recent Mandates and their Outcomes

Over the past fifteen years, British Columbia has seen five provincial public-sector wage mandates—preceding the tentative 2025 framework. Three were implemented by the BC Liberal government (2001 – 2017) and two by the current NDP government (2017 – 2025+).

The 2010 Net Zero Mandate, introduced after the fallout of the 2008 – 2009 global recession had mainly cleared, prohibited any net wage increases. Any improvements to compensation were required to be offset by equivalent savings elsewhere. The subsequent Cooperative Gains Mandate (2012) linked wage increases to productivity improvements, resulting in only modest gains. The final Liberal-era framework, which spanned 2014 to 2018, delivered average annual increases of roughly 1.5 percent. When compared with national inflation trends over that same period, public-sector workers in British Columbia effectively experienced a real wage loss of approximately 1 percent over the life of the agreement.

Under the NDP, the first mandate provided workers with a small real gain—about two-thirds of a percent above inflation over three years. The 2022 – 2024 framework produced an additional increase of roughly half a percent against inflation. Taken together, these two agreements slightly improved the economic position of public-sector workers, offsetting earlier losses but only partially repairing the very significant erosion of real income incurred during the previous government.

Assuming inflation concludes at roughly 2 percent for 2025, with the Bank of Canada projecting similar rates through 2027, the new tentative agreement's annual wage increases of 3 percent annually represent the most favourable settlement relative to inflation in some time and by a significant margin.

Importantly, this achievement cannot be credited to government largesse. Even under an ostensibly labour-friendly administration, substantial gains were not simply offered—they were fought for. Notably, in August 2025, the Hospital Employees' Union (HEU), which did not engage in strike action, reportedly accepted a framework agreement that fell below inflation. The persistence of the BCGEU and PEA, through one of the longest and most consequential public-sector strikes in recent provincial history, prevented a sub-inflation framework from becoming the provincial template, if reports are correct. Their determination yielded the first meaningful real wage improvements in decades.

Conclusion

One lesson of the GEU strike, then, is that working people, and the unions that represent them, make their own destiny, not political parties. While we may be able to count on certain parties for more labour-friendly legislation than others, we cannot treat political parties—with their own independent demands and imperatives beyond those of working people—as our salvation. Rather than falling in behind any one party, working people and unions are better served by banding together to push to win our needs—and pushing for our organizations to fall under no illusion that we will be saved by this or that government.

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