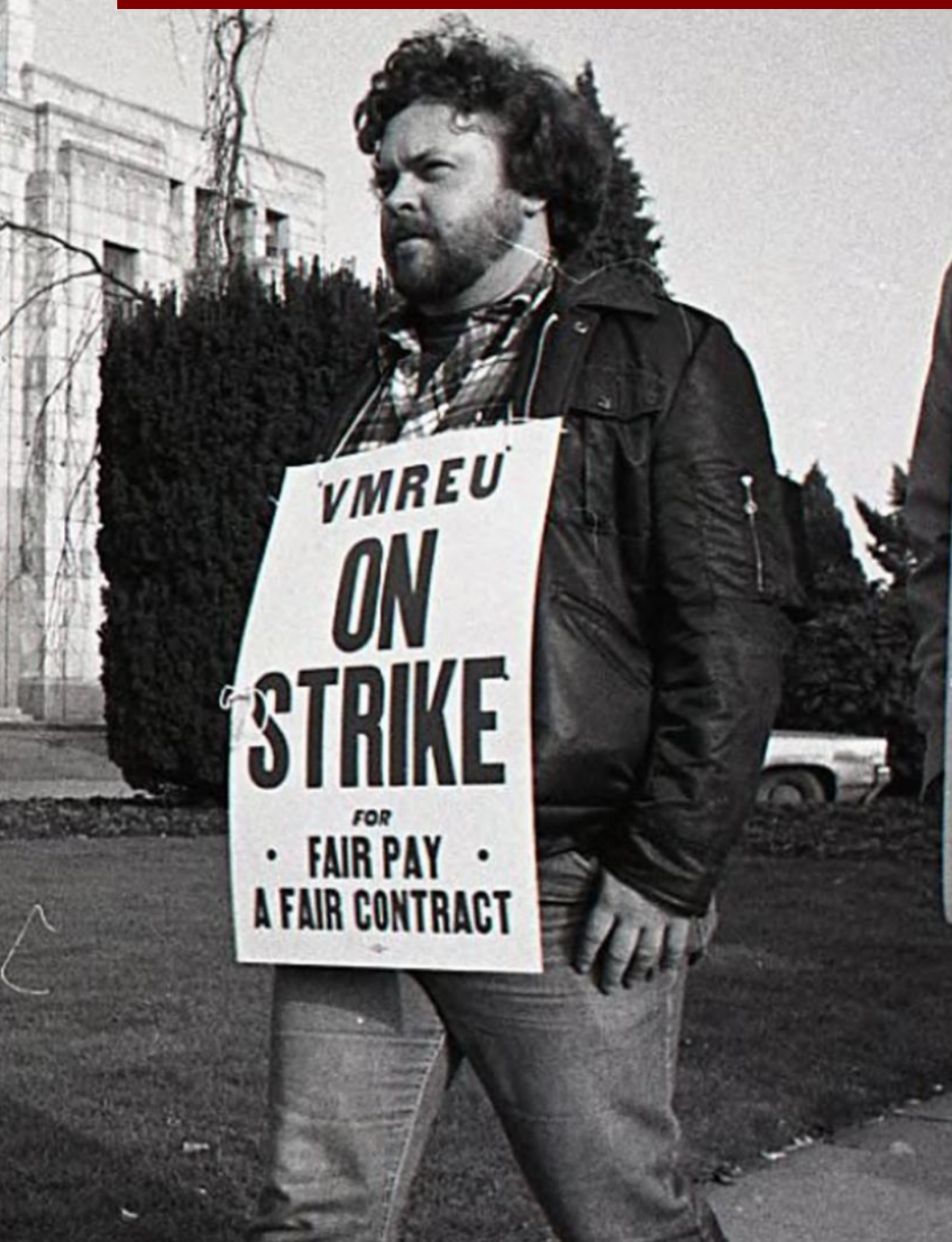


CUPE Local 15: Reflections on a Century as a Union



CUPE Local 15 – Reflections on a Century as a Union

by Joey Hartman

The Early Days

A banquet was held on January 18, 1928 at Spencer's Ltd. on West Hastings Street. The popular department store, now the site of the SFU Harbour Centre Campus, also housed an auditorium that was the frequent site of civic events. This gathering marked the 10th anniversary of the Vancouver City Hall Employees' Association (VCHEA) which had formed in 1918 to provide a collective voice for "inside" municipal workers.

Guests dined on filet of sole with anchovy sauce, roast turkey, and assorted sweets. In attendance were the association's leadership, Mayor Louis Taylor (who ran as a friend of organized labour but opposed labour militancy and communists) and other luminaries. The program included a toast to the king, speeches, musical performances, and dancing until midnight.

The banquet reflected a collegial relationship between the workers' representatives and city officials ten years into the new union's existence. But when VCHEA formed a decade earlier, the class divide and labour relations in western Canada were tumultuous.

High society viewed unions, which had been completely illegal until 1872, as communist and

evil. The 1917 Russian Revolution confirmed their fears of uprisings, as did the Vancouver sympathy strikes held in support of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike.



Stanley Q Woodvine photo

While no longer illegal since the 1872 federal Trade Unions Act, nothing in law compelled employers to “recognize” unions until 1944. This meant employers could simply ignore the existence of a union; refuse to meet or negotiate. When PC1003 was passed into law near the end of World War II, unions gained recognition but lost the right to strike or “down tools” during the term of a collective agreement. Instead, every agreement included a grievance and arbitration process to address complaints without work stoppages.

In any case, in 1918, the new association with Mr. F.D. Corrin as its first president preferred dialogue to job action. Their view of the world came from inside city hall and a civil service that took pride in their reasoned and persuasive approach to labour relations. That said, they sought improvements, and combined in 1919 with outside workers, the Policemen’s and Firemen’s unions to form the

“Civic Federation” that negotiated their first collective agreement with the city.

The two-page agreement outlined a process “whereby misunderstandings which from time to time in the past have arisen and should in future be prevented”. Hours, salaries, and working conditions were listed as discussion topics, but the agreement was explicit that such dialogue could only lead to recommendations, not obligations.

Over the next decades the association gained actual negotiation rights and grew in size and scope. Some new bargaining groups came about from departmental divisions as the city grew, such as the creation of the Vancouver Park Board in 1953.

Others came from new organizing, including support staff at the Vancouver School Board and Police Department.

The internal workings of the association were governed by its Constitution and Bylaws, which specified the following:

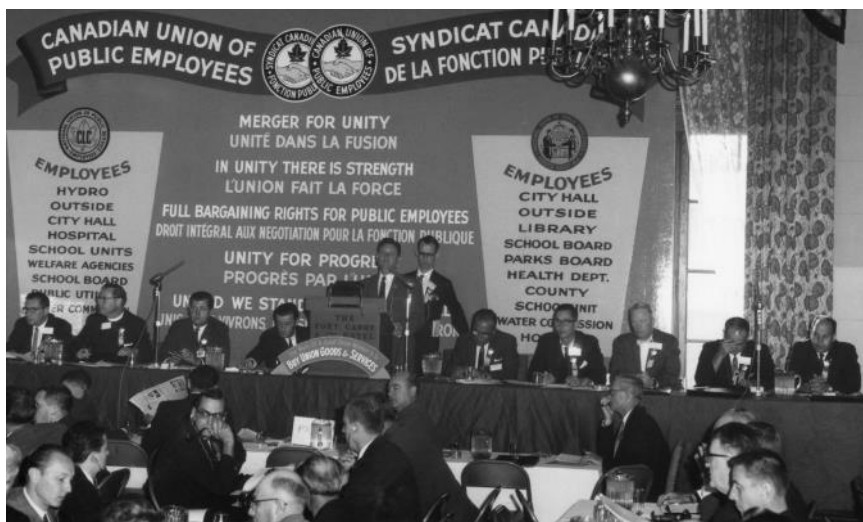
- The association was for members of the City Hall Employees and such other civic organizations as accepted into it.
- Female members of the City Hall Employees shall be deemed eligible for membership as associate members.
- Dues not more than \$1 per month, and half of the \$1 initiation fee went towards the first month of dues

- .Objectives:

- a) To obtain and maintain reasonable working conditions and a just and reasonable scale of salaries for civic employees;
- b) To cooperate with City Council in maintaining a just, impartial, and efficient public service;
- c) To promote and develop sociability between the members of the association;
- d) To give legal and financial assistance to members in cases of misfortune, adversity or illness;
- e) That 20 paid up members present at any meeting constitute a quorum.

This constitution was typical for the times, but times were changing.

Unions across Canada were growing, and public sector workers across the country were signing up.



ABOVE: Founding Convention of Canadian Union of Public Employees, Winnipeg, 1963. CUPE Photo.

Most joined either the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) or the National Union of Public Service Employees (NUPSE). These two unions merged together to become Canada's largest union - the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in Winnipeg at a founding convention in 1963.

CUPE's first national president was Stan Little of NUPSE. Having led public sector unionism through a period where almost no workers had the right to strike, he had been credited with bringing public sector unions "from collective begging to collective bargaining".

The VCHEA was in attendance but decided to stay independent. CUPE respected the decision and held onto Local #15, its intended number, in the hopes that the Vancouver inside workers' union would have a change of heart.

Over the 1960s and 70s the union continued to organize and expand, and also to become more militant. New members in that era included employees from the Vancouver Art Gallery, Emily Carr College of Art, Vancouver Community College (which included VVI and Langara), Ray-Cam Community Centre, Britannia Community Services Centre, and some student union staff. By 1980 the union had 19 different bargaining units, each with their own collective agreement.

The Bigger Picture – Acting in Solidarity

Significantly, the VCHEA changed its name during this era to the Vancouver Municipal and Regional Employees' Union (VMREU). This 1970 name



ABOVE: CUPE delegate holds up sign in protest during speech by federal labour minister John Munro to the BC Federation of Labour Convention in Vancouver, November 1975. Sean Griffin photo, Image MSC160-172_17, Pacific Tribune Photo Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.

change was more than symbolic. It recognized a transformed organization that was prepared to fight for improvements and against injustice, and also reflected the changing membership beyond municipal workers.

One fight was against Bill C-76; Pierre Trudeau's "wage and price" controls. Inflation was soaring and unions were winning significant wage increases to try to keep up. Trudeau never brought in the price controls, but in 1975 capped wages at 8% in the first year, 6% the second year, and 4% the third year. By 1976 they added salt to the wound with an Anti-Inflation Board (AIB) that began to roll back workers' wages. The labour movement called October 16th as a day of action in protest. The



ABOVE: VMREU sets up pickets at Vancouver Technical School in solidarity on November 8, 1983 as British Columbia Teachers' Federation members launch strike action as part of the Operation Solidarity escalating strikes against the Social Credit government. Sean Griffin photo, Image MSC160-907_07A, Pacific Tribune Photo Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.

VMREU sent representatives to Ottawa to join a huge demonstration while a million Canadians staged a one-day strike.

The VMREU was also deeply involved in the 1983 Operation Solidarity and its partner Solidarity Coalition. Emboldened by the neo-liberal agendas of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the USA, newly elected Premier Bill Bennett and his Social Credit government went on an attack

under the guise of “restraint.”

On a single July afternoon, the government introduced 26 pieces of legislation. Some Bills removed the rights of public sector unions to negotiate wages and almost all working conditions, and one allowed public sector employees to be fired “without cause”. Others would dismantle the BC Human Rights Commission and the Employment Standards Board, and third allowed employers to lower the wages by simply stating they didn’t have

an “ability to pay”.

The response by unions, including the VMREU and community groups began with 25,000 people rallying on the lawn of the BC legislature. In August, 40,000 people booked off work on the same day to attend a rally at Empire Stadium. Protests were held across the province and a general strike seemed possible. It was averted when Premier Bennett finally agreed to negotiate with the BC Federation of Labour as represented by IWA President Jack Munro.

VMREU members again stayed off the job for a bigger cause in 1987 when the next Socred premier, Bill Vander Zalm, introduced the anti-union Bill 19. Again, the legislation took direct aim at unions’ abilities to organize or represent their members. It also replaced the Labour Relations Board (LRB) with the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), which was boycotted by labour until returned as the LRB. A special VMREU meeting authorized participation in the BC Federation of Labour Action Plan, which included a \$2 per capita assessment and participation in job action if the VMREU or any other union was victimized.

Changing Leadership and Changing Unions – Becoming CUPE Local 15

The leadership of the union was also changing. In 1977 a slate of new activists challenged the long standing union executive. Only their candidate for president, Gudrun Fiddis (Langolf) from VSB was successful, defeating incumbent Len Hexter.

Elections were held for the whole executive every year, and in 1978 Fiddis was joined by a solid majority from her slate. Their leadership was characterized by membership participation, social activism, and a greater involvement in political action and the broader labour movement.

By the late 1980s there were new contenders for leadership and some sharp divisions as two groups challenged each other for election each year.

The membership grew increasingly frustrated by this polarization and it's possible that this conflict

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made the VMREU more vulnerable to raiding by other unions. As an independent “non-affiliated” union, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) protections against raids did not apply. The first attempt was in 1993 by OTEU 378 in an unsuccessful raid on VCC and Emily Carr. This was

followed in 1994 by the Teamsters, who were able to raid the VMREU members at the Greater Vancouver Regional District and Police Department.

At the same time, the VMREU began serious conversations with CUPE National about affiliating. It's possible there were two objectives; first to take the union's place within the broader labour movement, and secondly as protection against

further raiding.

Those discussions led to a formal agreement in 1995 for the VMREU to become CUPE Local 15, claiming the number that had been reserved for over 30 years. It also offered an opportunity to change the union's full name again; the updated CUPE Local 15 - Vancouver Municipal, Education and Community Workers once again reflected the expanding scope of its membership.

Affiliating to CUPE, and through it the Canadian Labour Congress, brought stability. The union leadership became more cohesive and the raiding by other unions eased off.

Job Action to Protect and Advance Hard Won Rights

Processing grievances, negotiating new collective agreements, providing training and education, publishing newsletters like the New Gazette and Members' Voice have always been the core work of the union. Much is fairly routine, but other aspects are extraordinary.

At some point in the union's history, virtually every bargaining group has had to take strike votes or embark on job action to support their demands for improvements or just to resist employer concessions.

City workers had to defend their collective agreement against concessions whenever the right-wing NPA held a majority on City Council.

In 1972 workers were forced to strike when Tom



ABOVE: VMREU at B.C. Federation of Labour rally in February 1983 for municipal, telephone strikers at the Agrodome. Sean Griffin photo, Image MSC160-591_13 , Pacific Tribune Photo Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.

Campbell was mayor.

Nearly a decade later Mayor Jack Volrich and other municipal mayors demanded significant cuts to benefits, resulting in a 14-week civic strike throughout the lower mainland. The municipal employers had all contracted with the GVRD (now Metro Vancouver) Labour Relations Department to negotiate for them. It consolidated the employer's power, and put bargaining at arm's length from the politicians.

Their employer spokesperson was Diane Bell, who had previously worked as a VMREU Staff Representative. She had even formulated many of the union's proposals!

It was later learned that the employers wanted to save six weeks of wages to balance budgets, and Ms Bell had been hired on her promise to force a strike

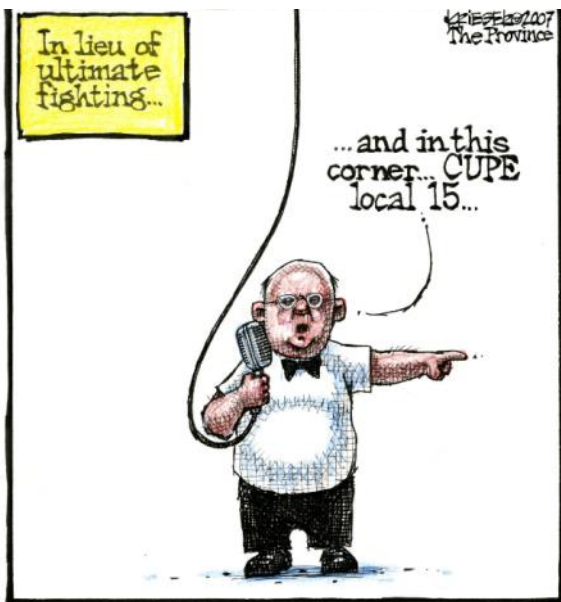
for just that duration. But by the 6th week pay equity, a union demand far down the original list, had become a key issue.

After 14 weeks on the picket line, substantial settlement terms included special adjustments representing a year of the pay gap between low waged inside workers – mostly women – and the lowest paid outside worker, which at the time was called “garbage collector”.

One memory from that strike was the night calypso legend Harry Belafonte respected the picket line at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre and did an impromptu sidewalk concert for the strikers. Another was when Mike Harcourt was elected as the new mayor in the middle of the strike, and had to apply for a picket pass to report for work.

The next major city strike was in 1994 when Philip Owen was mayor. This time the VMREU bargained alone instead of jointly with CUPE. Members rejected the employer’s concessionary proposals by 100%, and supported their bargaining committee with strong strike votes.

The main issue was employer concessionary demands on hours of work and scheduling. They wanted “flexibility” to assign work any time between 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m., Monday to Friday, at straight time wages. They also demanded that part-time and auxiliary workers, already exempted from significant rights enjoyed by full-time regular employees, to work double the required number of hours to move up a wage increment from 1,044



Bob Krieger, 2007. Editorial Cartoon Collection,
Simon Fraser University Special Collections.

hours to 2,088.

There was job action in 1994, but not a full-out strike, except at the Museum of Vancouver which was out for a solid six months.

Rather, the union showed itself to be innovative when it came to

strategic and high-impact job actions such as overtime bans and rotating strikes. The union pulled parking enforcement staff and boosted their picket pay, while everyone else stayed on the job. Paper bags offering free parking hooded meters around the city, while stickers blocked coin slots and “tickets” that asked for the public’s support went on windshields.

Less popular with the public was the union’s intention to pull Queen Elizabeth Theatre staff for the wildly popular musical “Cats”. The union’s plans were leaked to management who redeployed excluded staff (illegally and at double time pay) from other workplaces to run the show, causing tension and conflict between picketers and patrons that was widely reported in the media.

And then there was “Sam’s Strike” which lasted for

12 weeks in 2007 when Sam Sullivan was mayor. A bargaining impasse was finally referred to mediator Brian Foley, who handed down his recommendations in early October.

CUPE Local 15 members, representing 2,500 municipal workers, voted in favour of the recommendations by 73 percent. The new contract provided for a wage increase of 17.5 percent over five years and a \$1,000 signing bonus, a special Winter Olympic dispute-resolution process, and six-month notice of the contracting-out of work.

Other strikes included a single day at the Vancouver Art Gallery in the mid 1980s, and in 1991 both VCC and VSB saw job action.

Working in a political environment means it matters who gets elected. One example is the changing winds with regard to the City's four-day work week program. Originally introduced in 1976 as a response to traffic congestion and parking, it had become unpopular with some managers by 1982. City Manager Fritz Bowers recommended elimination of the compressed work schedule, but City Council voted 6-5 to retain it. Those in favour were COPE mayor and councillors Mike Harcourt, Harry Rankin, Bruce Eriksen, Libby Davies, Bruce Yorke, and NPA councillor Don Bellamy. Many CUPE Local 15 members were able to retain this until 1999.

Women's Rights

Other rights took centre stage at different points as well, for example, women's rights. Despite the Sex

Disqualification Act of 1931, the expectation continued that women would resign when they married. A 1958 letter from the Vancouver Council of Women quoted from the Act that “No person shall be prevented because of sex or marriage from being appointed to any judicial or civil position or from entering into and carrying on any profession or vocation.” The letter referenced an “incident in the Police Accounts and Records Department” and encouraged an immediate remedy to this apparent “oversight.”

Then in 1958 council voted to change the retirement age for women from 60 to 65 to match men’s. The union opposed unless employer contributions to the superannuation (pension) plan were also increased. At the time, women received an employer contribution of 3% to age 45 and 6% for the next 15 years to age 60 when they were forced to retire, whereas men received 4% to age 50 followed by 8% to age 65. Later in the year the issue, still unresolved, was referred to discussions between the City admin and the union.

By the early 1980s the union had an active women’s committee that took on issues such as reproductive rights and sexual harassment as union concerns, and advanced pay equity as an ongoing bargaining demand across all sectors.

One key activist was Sister Kathryne Holm from Social Planning, who helped to found both the City Hall Day Care and the Vancouver Municipal and Regional Retirees’ Association.



ABOVE: VMREU was part of Day of Action on Abortion rally, Vancouver, October 14, 1989. Dan Keeton photo, Image MSC160-1838_34, Pacific Tribune Photo Collection, Simon Fraser University Library.

Employment Equity and the Changing Workplace

In 1958 the union wrote to the city to request a two pay grade premium for staff approved as translators. The case of Mr. M. Borgo was cited to support the union's case. Mr. Borgo worked in the Building Department where his fluency in Italian was frequently called upon. The Health and Personnel Departments also benefited from his skills, but he received no compensation or relief from normal duties. It was noted that the public courts paid \$80 monthly retainers to translators, and the city should do the same to recognize the demands of the "increasingly cosmopolitan nature of the city."

The translator case was an early indication that Vancouver's demographic was changing. By the 1970s the City responded by creating an affirmative action program. The program was disbanded by an

NPA council, and then re-established in 1981 by Mayor Harcourt. It included three committees: Race Relations, Disability, and Women's.

In 1983 the council received reports on the identifiable minorities by department. It was clear that Vancouver's diverse communities were poorly reflected on staff. The objective was to build a civic workforce more reflective of the general population through initiatives for more diverse hiring and advancement opportunities.

One example was the very poorly paid building cleaners who had no promotion opportunities. Most were south Asian immigrants, and most were women. In 1983 the program designed on-the-job training alongside better paid building maintenance workers, who were mostly men, to position the cleaners to qualify for openings.

The union participated in parts of the affirmative action program but was wary because union recommendations to build equity had been ignored or rejected. Further, many employer proposals required overriding collective agreement rights, which the union explicitly opposed. However, the union enthusiastically supported initiatives that built equity while also respecting the collective agreement.

Tech change – Computers replace Typewriters

During the early 1980s, computers were replacing typewriters on many office desks. The new Video Display Terminals (VDTs) caused significant concern. One fear was around learning the new

technologies, which were far from “user friendly” and required memorizing codes. More significant was the fear of radiation leaks and the impacts on reproductive health. Competing and inconclusive medical and scientific reports of the day did little to alleviate these fears.

The VMREU was actively involved in joint committees to ensure its members concerns were addressed to the degree possible. Their participation and advocacy resulted in appropriate ergonomic furniture, rest breaks through a variety of work, acoustic covers for printers, and the right for pregnant women who wished it, to be reassigned to other work.

Social Activities

Improving rights and wages are important, but unions are also important social hubs and CUPE Local 15 is no exception. From those early banquets to annual summer picnics at Stanley Park, and later sailing up Indian Arm on the Britannia to Belcarra Park to feast on Mike Plunkett’s famous teriyaki salmon, the union has always brought members and their families together to enjoy each other’s company.

“...Planetarium staff showed up wearing ‘grizzly bear’ slippers in response to a director’s memo...”

Humour as a Tactic

And sometimes a little workplace fun at the expense

of management, like the summer day that Planetarium staff showed up wearing “grizzly bear” slippers in response to a director’s memo that required women to wear “solid-colour, full length stockings and shoes at all times. Please, no bear (sic) toes with sandals”.

Bursaries for Members and their Families

The union also has a long and continuing tradition of awarding bursaries to help members and their dependants with the costs of post-secondary education. The first bursary was \$100 to attend UBC. It was in 1958 and selection was based on a combination of financial need and academic standing. The program had added SFU and totalled three bursaries of \$100 each by 1966 when the photos of two recipients were in the Gazette. David Rutter’s father was a member in the Social Services Department and Donna Engbercht’s father was a worker in the Building Department.

Looking Toward Our Future

Throughout this last century, the union has benefited from leadership that worked hard to advance the interests of its membership.

The union has had full-time secretary-treasurers since 1979. The position has been filled by Gordon Bailey, Brenda Coombs, David Cadman, Joey Hartman, Diane Barrett, Donalda Greenwell-Baker, Sherry Crooks, Brenda Coombs, Jean Dandrea, Leanne Toderian, Barbara Dickinson, and from November 2015 to 2020 your current Secretary-Treasurer is Sally Bankiner.

Gudrun was elected president in 1978, and there have been many others. Since it became a full time position it has been filled by Paul Faoro (who first attended a steward retreat in 1985 at age 19), Leanne Toderian (Anderson), and Warren Williams from May 2015 to present.

Fast Forward to 2018 and the Years Ahead

The union's Executive has held annual strategic planning sessions and think-tanks to formulate an action plan to carry the union forward for the next era with a new vision. This vision has enabled CUPE Local 15 to put a greater emphasis on steward recruitment and member engagement. A revitalized education plan, the development of a new and interactive website, an updated communications plan, engaging new and young workers, emphasizing local social justice causes, engaging in worksite visits and other meaningful and measurable goals are designed to make CUPE Local 15 members feel proud of and engaged with their union.

The BC Labour Heritage Society will be presenting a bronze plaque on June 22nd at the 100 Year Anniversary Celebration. This bronze plaque has been forged to recognize the past 100 years of CUPE Local 15 and its contributions to the labour movement and to recognize those who will come afterwards and carry on their work long into the future.

An article from the New Gazette (currently The Members' Voice) details how the land was

purchased in 1958 for \$14,238 and the membership approved construction in 1964. The current building at 545 West 10th Avenue in Vancouver served the union's needs in the 1970s but as soon as 1987 the leadership recognized that they were fast outgrowing the building. However, they were not successful in making a change. Forward to 2018, the Executive Board has successfully made the case to the membership that it is past due time to make an absolutely necessary change and move forward by putting our current inaccessible building up for sale. Times and needs have indeed changed over the years and soon the current building will also be part of the past.

There is much to celebrate, with appreciation to the many thousands of members who came before. Over the past 100 years the union has made a positive impact on many citizens and union members. Today over 7,000 members work each day to defend public services in the municipal, parks, health care, technical, cultural, arts, and public education sectors. That's reason to be proud.

Joey Hartman recently retired as the president of the Vancouver & District Labour Council. She began her union activism in the VMREU while working at Ray-Cam daycare, and later in the City of Vancouver Engineering Department before serving as a union rep for the Compensation Employees' Union and Hospital Employees' Union. The author accepts responsibility for any errors in this article.



Photo courtesy CUPE BC.

The BC Labour Heritage Centre Society preserves, documents and presents the rich history of working people in British Columbia. The Society engages in partnerships and projects that help define and express the role that work and workers have played in the evolution of social policy and its impact on the present and future shaping of the province.

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