

Another Olympics Legacy -- Frozen Wages

By Roger Annis

In selling the 2010 Winter Olympics to a reluctant public, there was much talk by Games' boosters of a "legacy" that the province would enjoy, including increased social housing, improved public transit and more public sporting facilities.

The social housing promise was junked long before Games opened. Public transit is caught in the familiar squeeze of inadequate government funding, on the one hand, and already-excessive fares on the other. The failure of public transit in the Vancouver region is made all the more galling by the billions being spent on road expansion and on the choice of rapid transit technology that makes Vancouver's few lines the most expensive that money can buy.

Now another Olympics "legacy" is unraveling, in the form of wage freezes for public sector workers. Forty eight thousand workers in BC's public health care system have just ratified by a vote of 77 percent new collective agreements that contain no net increases in financial compensation. Ninety percent of the workers are members of the Hospital Employees Union, an affiliate of CUPE.

They are the second group of workers to have a wage freeze imposed in the post-Olympics era. The first was 14,000 community health workers. Most of them are members of the BC Government and Service Employees Union. Four locals of CUPE who are covered by the same master agreement voted against it.

New collective agreements for two hundred thousand more public service workers are being negotiated.

The expired collective agreements in BC's public sector were negotiated in 2006. They provided for annual wage increases in the three to four per cent range as the government sought to buy labour peace until the Olympics were over. They did not resolve many difficult and outstanding issues such as job security in privatized, formerly public, health care facilities and services.

Wage freezes are also becoming the norm in BC's largest industry, lumber and sawmilling. The first and only agreement so far, at 15 Canfor operations in the BC interior, has a two-year wage freeze followed by increases of two per cent in each of the third and fourth years.

Since the election of the rightist Liberal Party in 2001, the minimum wage in British Columbia has fallen to the lowest provincial rate in Canada.