

# DON'T MOURN, ORGANIZE!

WORKERS AROUND THE WORLD REALIZING THEY HAVE MORE POWER WITH A UNION

By David Hogben

**TWO YEARS OF THE COVID-19** pandemic followed by rapidly rising prices for gas, food and housing have propelled workers into fighting back for their jobs and their quality of life.

Workers internationally are fighting high-profile campaigns organizing some of the most anti-union corporations on the planet. And similar battles are being fought in B.C.'s unionized construction industry.

"The prevalence of international headlines that we are seeing in the news, of workers winning against Amazon and Starbucks, and our local headlines, like the government's proposed changes to the Labour Code to protect B.C. workers and their right to form unions in their workplace without fear of intimidation, is creating a source of inspiration for workers who would not normally consider that they have the ability to create change in their workplace and bargain collectively for fairness," said Nav Malhotra, business manager/secretary-treasurer with LIUNA local 1611.

"BC workers are learning of their right to have and use their voice, and that they have more tools to stand up to financial exploitation and harassment than passively walking away or

suffering through it. Workers are steadily making the shift to unions," added Malhotra, whose union has seen a 24 per cent increase in membership over the past two years, making it the largest LIUNA local in Western Canada. At least a third of the members are working in construction.

LIUNA has seen the growth from a variety of sources: workers joining the union to gain training and employment opportunities, non-union workers organizing their workplaces, and companies joining up to gain access to qualified union workers.

"We have had a great number of our certifications initiated by employers. We also work with workers wanting to bring change to their workplace through bottom-up worker-initiated campaigns." (Bottom-up refers to the workers themselves initiating union certification, while top-down certifications are employer-initiated.)

COVID-19 has helped shine a light on the true value and importance of having good medical benefits for proper self care, life insurance, and wage indemnity for the uncertainty life brings, said Malhotra.

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## How it starts

Sometimes, organizing drives are started after non-union workers find out what wages and benefits union workers are earning; a failed union drive can build a foundation for a subsequent campaign.

When organizers from an unsuccessful campaign leave the company for one with union pay and benefits, they often stay in contact with their old non-union colleagues.

"The ones that might have been the naysayers are now getting feedback from their friends working at the unionized workplace, now making much more money and their kids' teeth and vision and medications are being taken good care of with superior union healthcare plans," said Malhotra. "They begin to see their old co-workers thrive and live better by working union and begin to shift their perspective and understanding."

Similarly, UNITE HERE Local 40 is seeing unprecedented growth in the construction sector on top of its traditional activity of representing hotel, airport, cafeteria and other hospitality industry workers.

"Over the last two years, we have had roughly 500 new camp and culinary workers join Local 40 on projects throughout Northern B.C.," said Local 40 executive director Robert Demand

"The vast majority of those are brand new construction camps where people have heard about the union standards that we have established in Kitimat."

Workers at the Sitka Lodge and Crossroads Lodge in Kitimat have organized. Crossroads Lodge members negotiated their first contract in April 2020 with major improvements to wages, benefits and working conditions, including layoff and recall rights. They were then laid off when the camp was shut down due to COVID concerns.

"Now after 18 months they are able to come right back into their former positions at the Crossroads Lodge," Demand said.

Word of the Crossroads contract has spread to other work camps.

"We started to get more and more calls from camp workers on Coastal GasLink and also on the TransMountain Pipeline," Demand said. "That is how things have spread and how a group of about 500 been organized in the last couple years."

## 'This is our time'

Camp workers have often been an under-appreciated part of the construction industry.

"We have been invisible on these big construction jobs. We are feeling like this is our time. People want a good living and a little respect for the sacrifices they make, like everybody else. That is why they are coming to us," Demand said.

Bricklayers Local 2 business manager Geoff Higginson said his union has seen growth through training workers and organizing.

"Bricklayers working outside the union find out they can get 20 per cent more pay working in industrial. So they are joining up."

One example saw workers for a Rio Tinto subcontractor contact the union.

"We took their wages from about \$22 to \$40 an hour. The people were just tired of being paid barely living wages," Higginson said.

"The union came in there and signed cards. We had a vote and the union won."

The union negotiated annual cost of living increases based on the Consumer Price Index.

BC Building Trades executive director Brynn Bourke said the rise in union interest is about more than wages and benefits. Workers realize their health and safety will be better protected with union representation.

"They are looking for representation that is going to stand up for them for their occupational health and safety rights







**Parsnip Lodge Workers in 2021**  
**UNITE HERE Local 40 Members**

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and also stand up for fair compensation,” Bourke said. “The message is that they want respect.”

## Technology boosts union organizing

The COVID pandemic has also changed how organizers work. LIUNA’s lead organizer Sarina Hanschke said COVID-related social distancing has changed organizing techniques. Now they rely more on internal workers to organize members and support them in their campaign with digital communications like Zoom calls and using QR codes to digital union leaflets and digital organizing cards, rather than traditionally meeting at or near sites where intimidation from the employer and confrontations can occur.

“Using different technologies to speak to workers helps us cover a lot of ground,” she said. “Nothing will ever replace the value of person-to-person communication, but investments in the generation of QR codes and digital organizing

cards helps exponentially increase the potential reach and helps workers come to informed decisions.

“It takes some of the angst away some may feel when it comes to being seen speaking with a union organizer. We’ve found people to be a lot more open and have the ability to share the union message faster with co-workers, by texting out links contained on people’s phones, rather than printed literature that can be detected by the employer’s eye.”



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**I believe camp workers deserve much better! Join me in being part of the solution as we fight for better wages and a better life for camp workers!**

Kathy, Cook  
 Horizon North Crossroads Lodge  
 Member, UNITE HERE Local 40