



**Speech by Sandra Wright, President,
Compensation Employees' Union (CEU), May 16, 2007**

Good afternoon. Thanks for coming out to share in this celebration of the CEU's birthday. For those of you who don't know me, I am Sandra Wright, the President of the CEU. I thought this would be an ideal opportunity to give a short history lesson on how the CEU was formed. In doing research around this, I found the past was quite interesting -- I hope you do too.

Thirty-three years ago on May 23, 1974, the then Workmen's Compensation Board Employees' Union was certified with 730 members. Up until then, the employees at the WCB had been represented through an association.

This employee association was formed in 1970. It was a time where there was a volatile BC labour climate, but workers at the WCB remained relatively comfortable with good wages and working conditions.

This association formed a list of objectives:

- Extended medical
- Annual vacation scheduling (fairness and consistency in administering)
- A bi-weekly pay period
- Enlarged and improved cafeteria
- Transfer of superannuation
- Sick leave
- Substitution pay
- Dental plan

By 1972, the association was moving to unionize. A change in government had resulted in public sector employees being given bargaining rights. The association recognized that as a union they would be in a stronger position to bargain better rights for staff at the Board.

By December 1972, over 50 percent of the potential members had signed up to unionize and an application was made to the Labour Board to certify.

This application was rejected in February 1973 stating the WCB was not an "Employer" as defined by the Labour Relations Act, but an agent of the crown.

Then, in October 1973, a new Labour Code and Bill 75 were passed, which gave bargaining rights to government employees and to WCB employees. But that act also established there could only be three bargaining units -- nurses, licensed professionals, and public service. This meant that the only way we could unionize was to become part of the BCGEU (BC Government and Services Employees' Union).

We didn't want to do that. Independence was as important to the union then as it is today. The employee association then launched an action to establish why we should not be considered "public servants" and by default only able to unionize if we were members of BCGEU.

Part of the appeal put forth the argument that it would bring WCB employees into a "conflict of interest" to adjudicate claims of "fellow union members", and that there would be pressure placed on Board employees by unions and the BC Fed (BC Federation of Labour) to adjudicate claims in the favour of workers. (Now that we have been affiliated for a number of years, we can see how wrong that argument was.)

It took a year of appeals and a campaign for public support before the Labour Relations Board made a decision in April 1974 that the WCB was sufficiently autonomous from government to be granted status as an "employer".

Now, the remaining hurdle to overcome was the right to certify as an independent union. Both the BCGEU and the Health Sciences Association had been opposed to the formation of an independent union. However, by April 28, 1974, the BCGEU withdrew their objection and, instead, offered assistance to the creation of the WCBEU.

On May 23, 1974 the certificate hearing was held and the rest is history. The WCBEU was certified!

A number of hot issues came forward in the following years that culminated in our first and only strike of 1989.

- In 1975, the WCB had decided to open area offices. To staff these new offices, management picked names from a hat to decide who went where. The union went public over what they coined the “meat draw” and other issues, including poor working conditions, unfair treatment, and a refusal to bargain a second collective agreement.
- In 1978, the Board made a number of union jobs redundant and then posted them as excluded positions.
- In 1980, there was building dissatisfaction around arbitrary treatment in performance reviews, which at that time determined whether members got a pay increase -- and these reviews were not grievable.
- In 1983, there was major labour unrest in the province due to regressive legislation brought in by the Social Credit government. The union joined Operation Solidarity.
- In 1984, sick leave payout and a fortnight system were lost in bargaining. One hundred and thirteen members were declared redundant. The Board announced closures of Williams Lake, Fort St John, Penticton, Prince Rupert, and Chilliwack offices.
- 1986, we lost the cost of living allowance clause.
- In 1988, the union did a survey that confirmed over one-half of the membership were working unpaid overtime to keep up with work volumes.

I asked a few of the people that were around in 1989 about what their views were on why we went on strike. One of the people I spoke to was CEU Vice President Frank Lanzarotta who was at the bargaining table then. He said he felt a pretty good deal was on the table at the time. But nothing was stopping the members from going out -- even without a strike fund being in place so they could receive pay.

Too much had happened -- the tapping of individuals on the back and telling them they were moving, work volumes, no respect from management, loss of rights at bargaining -- all led to the members just wanting to make a statement to the employer.

The strike lasted three weeks. Following that strike, the members approved a dues increase of 0.03 percent to build a strike fund. We also changed our name to the Compensation Employees' Union.

I am proud to say that this past decision of the membership and executive to establish a strike fund has resulted in the CEU having a healthy strike fund of around 9 million dollars today.

This puts us in an extremely powerful position when we go into bargaining.

Since the strike of 1989, the union has completed many successful rounds of bargaining that has improved wages, benefits, time off, and working conditions for members. Each of those objectives listed by the association in 1970, and much more, have been achieved.

I think we have a lot to be proud of. In the past few years we have matured by making decisions to step outside our traditional walls. As a result of the 2004 decision to affiliate with the BCGEU, we have established the CEU's place in the larger labour movement. This gives us a strategic advantage to reach organized labour on issues that are important to our membership.

We made a decision to enter into a campaign to build lasting public consensus on the value of **publicly**-managed, administered, and delivered workers' compensation systems that respect **both** worker and employer rights and uphold the principles of the historic compromise.

We must take action to shape attitudes about what constitutes a good workers' compensation system because ensuring it is a fair and balanced system ensures that there is no call from any stakeholder to privatize.

This action will forge a more secure future for the CEU membership by making the broader community aware of the important work we do.

I'd like to thank you once again for coming out today. It would be nice to see this many of you at the general membership meeting, held at the Curling Club once per year, (not far away). Please think about attending next time you get a meeting notice.

Enjoy your cake and I'll hope to see you all in the fall at the AGM!