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Ambulance Paramedics Rally in Victoria

VICTORIA - More than 500 CUPE members and supporters joined striking B.C. Ambulance Paramedics in a mid-day march protesting government inaction.

A sea of fluorescent green jackets and a forest of CUPE flags made its way from the CUPE BC annual convention to a rally outside a "temporary" ambulance station housed for the past eight years in a hotel near the B.C. Legislature.

Speaker after speaker condemned the provincial government for refusing repeated efforts by the 3,500 CUPE 873 members to get an independent mediator and return to the bargaining table. Minister of Health Services George Abbott had suggested a 90-day delay and reneged on a promise to meet this week with Ambulance Paramedics of BC president John Strohmaier.

Strohmaier told the crowd that "crappy working conditions and ambulance stations, uncaring management, and lousy wages have led to a steady decline in what is health care's front line in the province."

In a message to Premier Gordon Campbell, CUPE National president Paul Moist said "your silence is NOT acceptable - there is no corner of the province where you can hide from us. We'll be in your face everywhere you go until we get back to the table and have a fair deal for our paramedics." Moist pledged the continued support of 600,000 members of CUPE across Canada.

B.C. Federation of Labour secretary-treasurer Angela Schira called the current dispute "a battle that many of us thought we won years ago - the right to collective bargaining, the right to respect in our workplace and the right to wage parity." She added that it is "insulting" that Campbell and Abbott gave themselves large pay increases but have been unwilling to talk to the paramedics about wage parity.

CUPE BC president Barry O'Neil suggested that "maybe the government that only worked 52 days of the year on their salaries should be put on stand-by and paid \$10/hour like the paramedics." He added that "this dispute is about equity, fairness and respect - and we don't need 90 days to figure that out."

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