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K-12 CUPE presidents talk the walk

VANCOUVER - CUPE local presidents representing 27,000 K-12 workers across BC met yesterday to discuss bargaining and possible strike action.

Following the breakdown of contract talks at the provincial bargaining table, more than half the 57 CUPE K-12 locals in BC have now taken local strike votes with the rest expected to be completed by the end of June. The main issues are job security and wages. CUPE K-12 workers have been without a wage increase since 2009. Talks at the provincial level broke down in April after six months of fruitless bargaining.

The presidents say a fair and reasonable contract settlement in line with other recent public-sector contracts is "first and foremost" but add that in light of failing talks, it's time to gear up for job action that could come as early as the fall.

The problem, says K-12 Presidents' Council Chair Colin Pawson, is that the school system has been chronically underfunded and denied a mandate by the provincial government to actually settle a new contract. Pawson said that "for the CUPE education workers who keep our schools clean, safe and inclusive, it's a case of hope for the best and prepare for the worst."

Responding to news that Premier Christy Clark has called for "labour peace in the classroom," Pawson said "for CUPE workers that will hinge on job security and a long-overdue wage adjustment as well as guarantees that the quality of BC's public education system will finally be protected with adequate funding."

CUPE represents education assistants, clerical staff, trades, custodians, bus drivers and dozens of other support worker classifications in 53 BC school districts. The average wage for a CUPE K-12 worker is \$24,000/year.

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