

## **Challenges Facing Workers in the North Presentation by John Gordon to NJC Annual Seminar September 23, 2009**

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Workers in the North face unique challenges every day that many of us don't realize, or likely understand.

Items we Southerners take for granted can be significant challenges for workers North of 60.

These can include economic, lifestyle and social, health and workplace management.

I would like to outline some of these challenges; in order for all of us to better understand them and commit to exploring ways to address these challenges together.

Economically, Northern workers are faced with wage increases well below the cost of living for their area, and the "additional benefits" which are meant to compensate for higher regional prices are both inadequate and diminishing.

The basic reality is that the structure and amounts of these allowances, originally designed to attract and retain employees, are rapidly falling behind current economic forces.

Statistics released by Statistics Canada show that the cost of everyday items in the North as compared to everywhere else in Canada is much higher:

For food:

Canadian average: \$6,800 per year vs. Northern average of \$11,000 per year.

And this does not include issues like the lack of selection and freshness

Household Furnishings:

Canadian average of \$1,800 per year vs. Northern average of \$2,500 per year

And for shelter:

Canadian average of \$10,800 per year vs. Northern average of \$14,700 per year.

But price is only one factor when it comes to economic challenges for our northern workers.

Because of the extreme isolation and lack of ground transportation, just getting basic staples can be a challenge.

For example, if you live in Nunavut, supplies for the year are barged in.

The sea lift operates only when the ice is open – which usually means only a few months of the year.

If you run out of something between shipments, you can't just run down to the gas station or the corner store.

If you do manage to find the article you are missing, you will most likely pay a very high price because supplies are extremely limited.

If you really need an item and it's not available in the North, the only other option is mail order.

Many Northern members are forced to order items from southern suppliers, typically in Edmonton, but the additional costs related to shipping, which is subject to delays because of inclement weather, can drive the price of items up significantly.

For federal public sector workers, allowances such as:

- the Living Cost Differential,
- Fuel & Utilities Differential,
- Environmental Allowance

- and Shelter Cost Differential

enshrined in the Isolated Posts Directive were designed to try to attract and retain workers in the North and other isolated regions in Canada.

But these allowances can disappear at any time based on the dictates of the employer.

We have a local example here in Whitehorse where members saw their Living Cost Differential portion of the Isolated Post Allowance removed.

Some blame the arrival of Wal-Mart and other big box stores as the reason for this loss.

Now, I am no fan of Wal-Mart, but they are not entirely to blame here.

The problem lies with the outdated formula and methodology used by Statistics Canada to calculate the costs of living.

By using an outdated formula, members end up being out of pocket for two reasons.

Not only are they paying higher prices than those of us in larger centres – even with the LCD, it doesn't cover it all.

But with an outdated formula, the allowance doesn't keep up with reality – it isn't able to keep pace with actual prices.

And of course, it doesn't take into account issues like freshness, availability, selection, etc.

The reality is that Wal-Mart, or any other big box store does not provide a solution to the higher cost of living here.

The solution requires updating the formula contained in the Directive, and including members in the process.

Because right now, while all of this is the subject of review and challenge, the members are left saying “what about us?”

This is probably what angers them the most – the lack of consultation and inclusion over decisions that impact them directly.

They feel like once again, they are being dictated to by the employer – located in the South.

This situation doesn't serve anyone's best interests – and just serves to deepen the divide felt between Northern workers and their employer.

The payment timing of these allowances can also be an issue.

Delaying or manipulating the effective dates does nothing to endear the employer to the workers – and causes aggravation that could be avoided.

Fair application of the directives is not only necessary; it respects the workers and the role of the NJC.

Other benefits such as Travel Allowances are designed to be beneficial, but they are structured in such a way that don't necessarily allow workers the latitude and flexibility they need to make the arrangements that are most convenient to them.

Travel to and from the North is a tricky business at the best of times and sometimes you need to be creative, flexible and adaptable in order to get where you need to go.

Everyone who lives and works in the North has to rely on air transportation which is subject to the realities of Northern weather.

Long-term planning of leave in the North is next to impossible.

Flights are regularly delayed and even cancelled due to weather, mechanical and cargo issues.

The strict dictates of the Isolated Posts directive don't address these issues.

Concepts such as most direct route and regular flights don't necessarily apply in the North.

Additionally, some allowances can be unfair and have an adverse effect on some workers.

A good example is the Shelter Cost Differential Allowance.

This allowance is meant to offset the high cost of homes in the North, but if a worker is single with no dependants, they are allowed only 60% of the allowance.

We assume this is because a single employee doesn't need as large a house, but, in the North, the reality is that most houses are bungalows and they're all the same size.

There's no such thing as a bachelor apartment in the North.

This means a single worker can often only afford a house in a less desirable location.

A very important thing to remember about all these allowances and benefits is that, although they are all considered taxable benefits, none of them are pensionable.

If an employee has established roots in a certain Northern community, perhaps started a family, and wants to retire there, they are faced with trying to live on a pension based strictly on the wages earned during employment.

The benefits they relied on during their employment will disappear.

This reality makes it difficult if not impossible to continue living in the North past their employment tenure.

You don't have to travel very far out of Iqaluit before you run out of roads completely.

Northern communities are, for the most part, cut off from each other because of the extreme distance between them and the lack of any kind of long-distance ground transportation beyond snowmobiles.

Could you imagine living in a community where you would need to charter a plane just to get to the next town over?

Within each Northern community, however, there is no lack of opportunities for socialization.

People in the South are used to cinemas where couples and groups of friends can take in a Saturday night movie.

In the North, communities organize regular huge pot-luck feasts. Southerners have bowling alleys where leagues of adults can bowl and socialize on a Wednesday night.

Northern communities have huge dance halls where music plays until late in the evening.

In the South, we have access to amusements parks.

In the North, communities organize spring festivals which last for entire weekends.

In the South, we have thousands of golf courses where friends or business acquaintances can enjoy 18 holes.

In the North, there aren't as many golf courses and they aren't all as pretty as the ones in the South or here in Whitehorse, but the golfers are just as passionate!

All of these stress-relieving activities are things that most people take for granted.

Socialization is different in the North, but the small communities and isolation serve to bring people closer together.

I'll speak more about the importance of community in a bit.

The real challenge of living in the North is in having to cope with far fewer services.

Services that the rest of us see as common can be extremely difficult to find in the North.

Things like childcare, dieticians, veterinarians, kennels, health & specialty food stores and workout facilities are simply not as common in the majority of Northern communities.

Workers in the North share in all the same workplace stressors as every other worker in the country.

Issues such as hours of work, abuse of authority, shift work and harassment are present in every workplace in the North, and, just like every other workplace, these stressors can lead to worker illness.

In the North, however, even addressing situations of worker burn-out is in itself another challenge.

The typical worker in Ottawa or Toronto or Vancouver or most other major centres in Canada can simply book an appointment with a doctor or therapist or some other health professional located in their community.

Health care professionals are in great demand in the North and they are typically situated in major centres such as Whitehorse and Yellowknife.

Northern nurse-practitioners are absolute wonders and totally professional, but sometimes a doctor is required.

This can mean workers have to travel a fair distance, often in bad weather, just to see a doctor.

In addition, there are very few specialists in the North.

If the medical issue requires treatment not available in the North, the worker must potentially travel a long distance to see a specialist in a major centre.

The added stress of travel and separation from family while suffering from a potentially serious condition can often exacerbate the situation.

It seems like employers are pulling back as much as possible on travel benefits for our members in order to offset the high costs associated with providing a certain level of care.

More and more claims for travel are being challenged by the cost centres and even in cases where the claims are eventually allowed, there is a great delay and the members have paid the expenses out of pocket.

It is patently unfair to subject a family that is undergoing the stress of serious illness to the potential that their claims may be delayed or even refused.

Workers in the North have many diverse employers, from the federal government to territorial and municipal levels of government and private sector employers.

One thing most workers share, however, is the feeling that their terms and conditions of employment are determined by individuals who don't have a proper understanding of their day-to-day reality.

There is a deep-rooted belief that the South is completely apathetic towards the North and really don't care about the challenges they face.

Workers are angered at the lack of understanding of their specific needs and feel that their resolutions for bargaining of wages and benefits – including allowances - seem to be ignored or dismissed.

It is quite evident that Northern workers want to have a larger, more direct role in determining the terms and conditions of their employment.

I can assure you that PSAC shares in this frustration.

We face these perceptions of apathy when we meet the various employers at the bargaining table, and we can feel the lack of understanding of Northern issues and challenges when we negotiate benefits at the NJC.

We realize that the demographics of Northern workers are changing.

Traditionally, the Northern workforce was largely transient; people who took a posting and then left at the end of their assignment.

It seems like the majority of benefits and allowances were structured to accommodate a transient worker.

This is no longer the reality, however.

The workforce in the North is no longer transient; it is made up of workers who actually live in the North.

One worker once told me: "I was born here, I work here and one day, I will die here."

We, the bargaining agents and the employers, need to recognize this shift and make efforts to change the way we bargain so we can ensure that local, qualified people will still be interested in these jobs.

The other mental shift we need to make is something I referred to earlier.

We need to stop thinking of these people only as workers.

We need to think of them as members of a community, with the needs and responsibilities inherent in members of a community.

How do we do this?

Well, many of the territorial and private sector employers in the North have already recognized this shift and have made subtle but important changes to employment standards, conditions and remuneration.

If you look at collective agreements across the North, there is no doubt that the benefits and allowances afforded to workers through NJC directives are the highest.

However, many employment contracts and collective agreements with non-Treasury Board employers contain far fewer allowances but higher base wages.

The end result is that the day-to-day remuneration between a Treasury Board employee and another employee is virtually the same, but the non-TBS employee banks a significantly higher pension amount.

This addresses the issue I raised earlier about workers not being able to afford to retire in the same community they have worked in for many years.

This trend is continuing to expand and soon it will become even more difficult for Treasury Board to recruit and retain workers in the North.

But it's not just about money.

Having spoken with many Northern members, PSAC representatives, negotiators and NJC Committee members, one word always seems to come out.

**Respect.**

Northern Workers want their particular needs and challenges respected and employers need to start recognizing and addressing it.

Some methods to accomplish this are becoming common with many of our private sector employers.

I'll give you two good examples of this.

The first is to take workplace issues very seriously and take all the necessary steps to address them.

Examples include abuse of authority, harassment, discrimination and occupational health and safety.

It is difficult enough attracting qualified people in the North without lingering workplace issues.

We need to provide employers, bargaining agents and employees with the necessary tools, training and funds in order to recognize, address and resolve common workplace issues.

We need to take these issues seriously, and commit to dealing with them quickly and efficiently.

Ignoring such problems doesn't work in anyone's best interests.

The second way to address workers' needs for respect is to recognize the Northern sense of community and allow workers to meet their responsibilities and obligations towards their communities.

Traditional and territorial activities such as fishing, hunting, harvesting and family, clan and community gatherings are all very important to local workers.

The concept of allowing Northern workers to earn discretionary leave, typically up to 5 days per year, in order to allow them the time and flexibility to participate in traditional Northern activities is becoming more common with private sector employers in the North.

We see this trend as continuing to expand.

In effect, we need to look more closely at the proposals and bargaining demands put forward by the workers themselves.

We need to stop looking at these proposals just as freebies and pie in the sky and try to see them from the Northern perspective.

PSAC negotiators are very experienced with the North; some of them live here themselves.

They work hard to be in touch with Northern issues.

But negotiations with Treasury Board are still done in a very traditional fashion.

Negotiations take place in Ottawa, by representatives on both sides of the table living in the South.

PSAC ensures that we have members from the North on our Treasury Board bargaining teams, to ensure Northern issues are raised and heard by the employer.

But of course, in negotiations, it takes both parties to agree to an issue.

That requires the employer being open to resolving Northern issues – taking them seriously and not as a footnote to negotiations.

Including solutions to Northern issues directly within the collective agreement – and not relying solely on the Isolated Posts Directive.

And utilizing the mechanism for dispute resolution contained within the collective agreement – which is much closer and accessible to the workers, and includes them in resolving problems.

These workers have unique needs that cannot all be covered by the Isolated Posts directive.

These needs have to be understood and respected – by bargaining agents and employers.

This is the only way to demonstrate that we are serious about meeting their specific needs.

I am sure we have all heard about the federal government's new focus on the North.

The Canadian military has greatly increased its presence in the North and the government is increasing funding for Northern infrastructure projects.

The largest investment in the North is definitely the creation of the Northern Economic Development Agency which will be housed in Iqaluit, with satellite offices in Yellowknife and Whitehorse.

The government has also pledged to address the socio-economic needs of the North, from proper roads and housing, to increased medical professionals and facilities.

What is really behind this attention and action?

Sovereignty and control over the rich natural resources of the North?

I think the government's focus should put the needs of Northerners first, and help address some of the challenges they face.

What the Northern communities really need is money – and control over where the money gets spent.

They need larger federal transfers, they need more investment in Northern interests and they need better wages and benefits.

There's no sense building houses if people can't afford them.

There's no sense building roads if no one can afford a car.

In short, the federal government needs to inject more investment into their primary Northern resource: the people who live and work there.

As I've said, many of the non-Treasury Board employers in the North are coming to this realization quickly and the trend is expanding.

If Treasury Board doesn't adjust their perspective to a more Northern one, when it comes to recruiting and retaining qualified workers, they may find themselves left out in the cold.

Representing workers across the North may have its challenges, but the rewards are outstanding.

This region is unique to PSAC.

We are the union of choice for workers in the North, representing the majority of unionized workers.

There are over 15,000 members of the PSAC spread out over all 3 territories, working for dozens of different employers.

Our Northern membership is diverse, in terms of the work they do, the languages they speak and the communities in which they live.

Outside of the major Northern cities of Whitehorse, Yellowknife and Iqaluit, the majority of our members live and work in small groups in very isolated communities.

While some members are directly employed by the federal government, the majority of our Northern membership works for diverse employers at the municipal or territorial level.

I think their diversity brings richness to the PSAC, and we are strengthened by it.

We have – and continue to – learn a lot about the North, thanks to these members being active within their union.

And certainly there is nothing more powerful than members hearing an Inuit member speaking passionately about an issue on the floor of our National Triennial Convention – in Inuktitut.

Each community has specific concerns, needs and frustrations, and we need to understand their needs and address their issues.

In order to do this we need to educate ourselves about Northern workers, Northern lifestyles and Northern challenges.

So how do we raise meaningful awareness of the North?

Well, this is a good forum right here.

Hopefully some of what I've said today will register with officials and representatives here for this seminar.

Another way to raise awareness and focus on Northern issues is contained in the Report of the Collective Bargaining Committee to the PSAC National Triennial Convention in April of this year.

The Committee established that out of 124 resolutions, the second-highest priority for the PSAC is the pursuit of the reactivation of the Conferences of the North.

The Conferences of the North first began in 1977 and continued until 1989.

The Conferences were originally established mainly in order to discuss Northern Issues and the impact of employer decisions on Northern workers.

In fact, the 1979 conference, held here in Whitehorse, including “communications between the North and Ottawa” on the agenda.

Although the majority of time was spent on compensation and benefits, the conferences also discussed socio-economic matters such as education, inter-cultural understanding and territorial concerns.

These Conferences afforded all participants the opportunity to view common issues from a Northern perspective, something which has been lost.

It also provided a forum for those directly impacted by allowances to have their voices heard.

While about 2/3 of the conference agendas were devoted to NJC-related matters, these conferences also provided a valuable forum to discuss issues specific to the North and its workers.

We need such a forum if we – employer and bargaining agents – are to learn about and respond to the needs of the Northern workforce.

Certainly bringing all the diverse players together physically for a conference is not without its own set of challenges.

But it is worth doing – for both bargaining agents and the employer.

PSAC – and our northern members – are certainly advocating for new Conferences of the North.

Having the NJC seminar here is a good start – but it can't end here.

Another way to allow our Northern workers have their voices heard instantly on issues which affect them is by using the technology currently at our disposal.

The North has one of the highest percentages of home computer usage in Canada.

What limits us from currently using this statistic to unify and hear from our workers is the ability to give them all high-speed access to the internet.

There they could congregate and communicate through things such as videoconferencing, webcasting, podcasting, electronic bulletin boards and subject-specific websites.

The current Canada Broadband Initiative is a good start but the government needs to make a more concerted effort to give the North greater access to the World Wide Web.

This would benefit both employers and bargaining agents, helping to remove the sense of isolation and disconnection felt by workers.

Engaging and including these workers on matters that impact their lives is only fair.

We must think of creative ways for removing barriers for Northern workers.

They cannot be treated as an afterthought, or as a footnote in negotiations.

They are not second class workers.

This is the responsibility of both employers and bargaining agents.

Respecting Northern workers means including them, listening to them, and working with them as equal partners at the table.

They deserve nothing less.

The Canadian North is a vast, beautiful place populated by wonderful diverse peoples.

All Northerners share a sense of pride and determination that they can live and thrive in some areas that are extremely remote under weather conditions that can be extremely harsh.

I, for one, have an admiration and respect for the work our members do under these conditions.

I thank them personally for their dedication to their jobs and to their communities.

No matter who our members work for, they are all performing a quality public service.

These are services that their communities and the entire country depend upon.

The quality public services our members provide helps to build stronger communities

We must all promote the value of quality public services and keeping these services public.

And not allow them to be further cut and dismantled.

Canadians across the country need to understand the value of these services.

Privatization, contracting-out, deregulation, P3s – are not the solution!

Public services delivered by public sector workers provide higher quality, better value and are essential in a democratic, progressive society.

As this seminar promotes us all working together, I would venture to say that this is our collective fight – as well as our collective responsibility - to ensure quality public services for the future.

When we Think Public, we also need to be thinking of the role we all have in creating a more just and inclusive society, both in Canada and around the world.

Quality public services help to deliver peace, democracy, fair development, equality and human rights.

We are living in a world where freedom is being eroded, and social inequalities are sustaining poverty – in Canada and worldwide.

In spite of years of economic growth, poverty is still on the rise in Canada.

Nearly one in six Canadian children live in poverty; one in four in First Nations communities.

This is too high – and we certainly cannot afford to allow this statistic to grow.

Our social safety net is disappearing and economic disparity and social exclusion are deepening.

Cuts to public services, to arts and culture, to social programs, to education – they are happening both here in the North and across the country.

Certainly one of the challenges facing workers in the North – and a challenge that is shared by workers across the country – is the maintenance of quality public services in our communities.

Canada's economic recovery requires public services and public sector workers.

Social services, including quality child and health care and environmental protection, are best delivered by those who do their jobs out of genuine concern for the collective welfare of Canadians and not by those who are motivated by profit.

Given the current global economic crisis, quality public services are needed now more than ever.

Whether we are here representing employers or bargaining agents – we are all part of Canada’s public sector.

We should all be proud of the work we - our members and our employers – do in providing quality public services to Canadians.

And we should all be opposed when these services – the work of our members and our employers – come under attack and threat of privatization or outright closure.

We all contribute to building stronger communities and a stronger Canada.

That is certainly true here in the North, but also all over the country.

Canada needs us, and the quality public services we provide.

So I hope that we can work together to protect these quality public services, now and into the future.

Thank you.