

President's column for September/October 2007

Submitted August 30, 2007 by Deb Thomas, President

"Better salaries make better staff – and better staff provide better service." – Mitch Freedman, President of the American Library Association in 2003

In April of this year, the United States celebrated Equal Pay Day – a day initiated in 1996 by the National Committee on Pay Equity, of which the American Library Association is an active member. The intent of this day was to publicize the fact that many women are still earning less than their male counterparts and that female-dominated professions still tend to be paid less than male dominated professions. Soon after this day and as a result of strong lobbying by the NCPE, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act was passed by the House of Representatives.

Pay equity has been and remains a critical issue in recent labour negotiations between library workers and their employers in British Columbia. The newly formed Public Library Interest Group of BCLA has taken a strong stand in favour of addressing pay equity in those libraries where it has not yet been addressed and hopes to be able to bring a draft position statement on the issue to the Board in the coming months.

Fundamentally, this issue is about fairness. Everyone - regardless of gender – should receive fair compensation for the work that they do. That this remains an issue for some of the largest public libraries in British Columbia highlights the fact that this province lags behind other provinces such as Ontario where pay equity legislation in the late 1990s increased the salaries of library workers by, in some cases, up to 24%.

The issues surrounding fair pay for library workers in this province are myriad, however, and are not all to do with gender. CUPE's *Overdue: Pay Equity for Library Workers* makes the following points from the public library perspective:

- Many entry level positions make as little as 64% to 82% of similar municipal labour jobs.
- K-12 and post-secondary library assistants can earn up to 22% more than municipal library assistants.
- The highest wage librarian positions in seven lower mainland public libraries made about \$8 less per hour than librarians at two universities and \$10 less per hour than librarians at two colleges.

Pay equity has of course also been and remains an issue in school, government and academic libraries. It is also vital to remember that there is a disparity between wages in urban and rural settings for similar library positions. Community librarians, for example, who are the sole managers (and sometimes the only paid staff) in small libraries may be paid less per hour than a clerical position in an urban public library. While one reality does not diminish the importance of another, a campaign for fair wages for library workers must include everyone who works in libraries – whatever their position and wherever they work.

In all sectors, the fight for pay equity and fair wages continues to be hampered with decades-old conceptions about the value of "women's work" and "men's work" as well as, in recent years, the notion that public sector workers are overpaid and this work would be done more cheaply if it were contracted out. Maureen Bader, BC Director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation was quoted in the Vancouver Courier recently as saying, "There is no reason the government should be collecting garbage, running daycares, or operating gyms, *libraries* [emphasis mine], pools, and community centres. We have Canadian examples of how contracting out has saved millions of dollars in other cities, and it can here too." (BCLA Executive Director Michael Burris

responded promptly with an excellent letter in defense of publicly funded libraries). For library workers, there is an added complication, described by Anne Turner, Chair of the Fair Compensation Campaign Task Force of the California Library Association: “Librarians and library workers are undervalued, and most people, whether members of the public, elected officials, faculty, corporate executives, or citizen board members, have little or no idea of the complexity of library work.” She goes on to note that, in her own experience, library work can be rated “way up there with planners and civil engineers” when assessed in compensation and reclassification studies for required skills, complexity, and knowledge but is often pulled back down when the “market rate (what the market is currently paying for these positions) is applied.” This has been my experience too. So, while a piece-meal approach where each group of library workers has to negotiate with its employer to achieve fair compensation is not ideal, we can be hopeful that those showing leadership will encourage others to follow.

I do understand the difficulty for managers and employers. As a library director who was tasked with funding a pay equity agreement I did not negotiate in the early 1990s, I know very well how difficult it can be to budget for significant salary increases when your overall revenue is not increasing at the same rate. Even when you fully support the concept in principle, cutting your book budget to accomplish it can leave you with some sleepless nights.

However, the issue is not going to go away and it’s not going to get any cheaper. And those who are involved in fair compensation initiatives know also that is never quick or simple. By choosing not to act, we risk demoralized workers and the loss of bright young people to other more lucrative sectors or professions.

We need to stand together to ensure that all library workers are valued and paid fairly and that our libraries are the best they can be.

The views expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the BC Library Association as a whole.

Sources quoted:

Bader, Maureen. *CTF Calls for Competition in City Services*. Retrieved 29 August 2007 from http://www.taxpayer.com/main/news.php?news_id=2624%5b1

Canadian Union of Public Employees. *Long Overdue: Pay Equity for Library Workers*.

Retrieved 25 August 2007 from <http://cupe.ca/bargaining/pelibraryworkers>

Freedman, Maurice J. President’s Message *American Libraries*; Apr 2003, 34 (4,) p 5. Retrieved 27 August 2007 from MasterFile Premier/EBSCOHost.

Turner, Anne M. *CLA’s Fair Compensation Campaign: Making the Case for Fair Pay*. Retrieved 27 August 2007 from <http://www.cla-net.org/resources/articles/fair.php>

A few of the websites devoted to this issue:

National Committee on Pay Equity <http://www.pay-equity.org/>

Pay Equity: a Fundamental Human Right (National Library)

http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/pubs/0662327535/200209_0662327535_1_e.html

American Library Association Allied Professional Association – Pay Equity (includes a Better Salaries Toolkit) <http://www.ala-apa.org/salaries/payequitybib.html>

All Things Being Equal: Pay Equity for Library Workers.

http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=EJ274719&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=eric_accno&accno=EJ274719