

## OPINION

### **Women dispatchers get justice at last**

*By Colleen Jordan*

A faint but growing cheer could be heard this week as women emergency dispatchers learned that they may finally get paid the same wages and benefits as their male counterparts.

A Supreme Court of British Columbia decision quashed an earlier ruling by the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal that allowed the City of Vancouver to pay women police dispatchers on average \$22,000 to \$33,000 a year less than male fire dispatchers.

These women workers, now members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, waited long and hard for justice. The decision took 17 years starting with the filing of a grievance in 1987. It failed so they filed a human rights complaint in 1990. It took the tribunal until 2000 to render its decision.

Such a delay is a travesty of justice with the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal wearing much of the blame for denying the original six complainants their rights.

Let's not forget that the women, many now working for ECOMM, the emergency call centre, endured a difficult strike to back their demands for wage equality. Had the court made its decision back then, we might have avoided the strike and the heartache and bitterness that accompanied it.

Still, it is a great forward step for the dispatchers and for women workers. And not just for those in Vancouver.

The court decision is historic. Women everywhere will celebrate. Now we await the next step: How will the Human Rights Tribunal deal with the decision?

It should simply redress the pay inequity faced by these women workers. Morally, it's the right thing to do. But there are major implications for five other municipalities as well.

Richmond, Coquitlam, Burnaby, New Westminster and North Vancouver all have emergency dispatchers. All had filed human rights complaints that were wrongly dismissed by the Human Rights Commission based on the City of Vancouver decision.

If justice holds, the Supreme Court has sealed off any further attempts to try to evade paying women equally by using a spurious argument about who employs them. The big question: Will the Liberal government in Victoria allow this to happen?

The Campbell government has not been kind to women. It has eliminated many of the services geared to helping them. It tore up the pay equity law. Its minister of women's equality angered women across the province by suggesting that the best path to equality is for women to get rich.

Perhaps there is an odd justice in the court decision this week. Now some women may actually be in a position to take the minister up on her suggestion. Sadly, many more will remain at poverty's door because of incorrect human rights decisions such as this one and outrageous delays.

Municipal employers would do the right thing by paying these women now. They should not have to wait for another tribunal decision.

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