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Readers' Letters

Feature Letter ~ 'ALL IN A DAY'S WORK' ~ Kerry Fleetwood, Sidney

I am a 16-year employee of BC Ferries. I am a wife, mother and grandmother. I have raised honest, law-abiding children, who both work now in union jobs. I pay taxes, income and property. I contribute to the economy. I am a good person. I am a hard-working person. I have been loyal to BC Ferries, going beyond the call of duty for this company.

I have put my life at risk many times, years ago, in severe storm conditions, operating a one-person island terminal with no power, dragging huge ship to shore cables, 80-feet long, up to the top of the aprons over churning seas, and dangling the monster power plugs over the edge for the docking ships' crews to reach. With the right angle and gust of extreme wind or far reaching wave, I could many times have been swept out to sea, with no other staff around to even witness my demise. I have put my life at risk, repeatedly climbing the gantry (top of the ramp structure, several stories above the water) to remedy an electrical switch problem that if not instantly corrected, would cause severe damage to the ramp and the next docking ship. With repair crews hours away, it had to be done. Such a duty was prohibited by WCB and not in my job description. But, unofficially, it was asked and expected of me by my supervisor stationed on another island.

I have taken stranded customers to my home for the night, having nowhere else to go and no way to leave the island. I have helped pay customers' fares out of my own pocket when they were caught short. Sometimes I was repaid, but just as often, I was not. I and my fellow workers decorated our terminal with flowers we paid for with our own money and Christmas decorations from our homes.

The year I spent on the ships, I came to understand the very important role that all the crew play in being trained and ready at any moment to handle many different kinds of emergencies. That reality was brought home when I took my MEC training, THE DROP. It was quite terrifying. Fellow crew broke bones. In a real emergency, our passengers would also be hurt if not worse, just in the evacuation procedure itself. It is very insulting to look at any crew member on board ships and not respect them first for all the various life-saving training they have been trained to do. Wiping tables and

cleaning toilets is secondary to their real purpose for manning the ships, and all the Captains and Officers look to them as vital members of a highly trained safety crew. Don't let the company mislead you into thinking that safety is not an issue. Safety is what every one has come to expect and takes for granted but it is in vigilant action every day out on the seas.

As a ticket agent at a major terminal now, I have been an asset for BC Ferries customer service. I like people. I like our customers. I personally have gone a long way towards creating a positive impression of BC Ferries on the travelling public. I also do a very good job collecting revenue for this company, many many millions over the years.

As in my own example, many ferry workers have done a variety of different jobs over the years. All those different experiences have created a cohesive, integrated work force, which up till now, have also helped build loyalty for our company. We are gravely hurt to hear our president denigrate us all and the many jobs we have all been proud to work. He has misled the public to think we are dipping into the 'gray train' of overtime, when in reality, the sailing schedules of the 1960's are inadequate for 2003. The ships would not run at all if not for the voluntary overtime that so many workers give to the company. It is a slap in the face to imply that those workers are greedy. They would rather be home with their families.

The proceedings of the last few months have been orchestrated by this 'New,' 'Private' BC Ferry Services Inc. and the Liberal Government to push our members into a corner. You must have heard by now, what they expected us to accept.

#1 - Longer Hours for less pay. Depending on who and where, between 6 to 10 weeks more work for free! Would you do it?

#2 - Lower wages resulting in lower benefits for new hires and new positions.

#3 - Pension Plan tampered, and finally, the very worst concession of all that really makes the last three insignificant, is:

#4 - The 'Unfettered Right' of the employer to contract out any and all jobs it sees fit to create PROFIT for the company. How could we sign away our jobs like that? Would you?

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The Liberal Government has, very undemocratically created the *Coastal Ferry Act - Bill 18*. They have given themselves permission to eliminate sailing routes after April 2008. They have given themselves permission to increase fares after April 2008, without limits, if the Service Provider can show need for costs and profit margins. They have given themselves permission to sell off assets, routes, service. Basically, they have given themselves permission to do what ever works for them with no consideration or obligation to communities or workers.

With Essential Services set this week, it was the employer who caused all the problems in sailing the ships on time. They locked-out regular, full-time employees of many years, with maximum safety training and experience, and wanted to exchange them for casuals. By rights, regular employees are entitled to work their regular shifts. They were on the ship to do their job, but the managers made them leave. The Union has been unfairly blamed for this.

The Government's 80-Day Cooling-Off Act was extreme interference. The Union and the Company were in the process of agreeing on the manning of ships' crews when Campbell jumped in. He has plotted all along to deny us our democratic right to protest extremely unreasonable demands of the company. So he pulls out a 'law' from three decades back and tells us we are suddenly breaking the law. This has been a set-up, premeditated from the start. There is question about the legality of the 'law' and its legitimacy in the first place.

I have been watching very, very closely over the last two months, and I know that our Union Leaders have been acting honestly and in good faith. They purposely have not been dragging this through the media, because they and we have taken ourselves seriously and did not want to appear as participants in a mud wrestling match though it became obvious that our employer was slinging mud at us.

Our Union Leaders have behaved with dignity and integrity in the face of horrendous insults both to themselves personally and to all our Union Members, from Captains on down. Only this 'new' company, run by the overpaid American CEO David Hahn (\$335,000.00 plus bonuses annually), sees our cleaners and catering staff, our shore staff, our ticket agents, our engineers, in fact, everyone who works here, as not being worth their wages, that they have rightfully earned over years of lawful bargaining. This 'New' company discredits every employees' years of training, experience, service and years of poverty-level annual incomes before they become regular full-time workers. The life of a casual is very very difficult. Only the hardier souls survive those early years. Every Ferry Worker here has paid their dues and is worth every cent they earn.

If I am not fired or in jail two weeks from now, I will have worked December 24, 25, & 26. This is the 12th or 13th year my Christmas will be disrupted for the public. My children have grown up on me and I have missed so much. It hurts to have the angry public drive by our picket lines yelling, 'Get a real job you lazy bums!!' and giving us the middle finger. I don't deserve that.

My fellow Ferry Workers don't deserve that. I am crying as I finish this letter to you. I've written so many, and so have so many others.

This is how the Jews of Nazi Germany must have felt, to be singled out by race, religion, ethnicity—union worker. So much of the media has been so biased against us. Is it because people have been stuck in ferry line-ups? Do you hate us all because the fares go up? Do you blame us for late sailings when it is really the fault of one driver who locked his keys in the car on the first sailing of the morning and delayed the rest of the day?

I've put in 31 hours on the picket line this week. I showed up at my work station this morning and remained there the entire shift. I am willing to work. I WANT to work. But I will not be bullied by this Liberal Government without speaking up. I will support all the other very fine people I work with and our dearly beloved Union Negotiating Team who are sacrificing so much for us and for all Labour in this province that is at the precipice of the same treatment from the Liberals. We are standing up for everyone.

Little Coverage of BC Ferry Workers Views

Dear Editor:

In watching unfolding events regarding the BC Ferries strike, I have been struck by how little coverage the individual worker's standpoint is getting. Hahn broke the media blackout agreed upon by the Union and Company before negotiations had even begun to tell us all about the management's side of the coin.

I have heard many other negative comments from Hahn, including his recent quote regarding the Union's commitment to full service on all routes from December 19 to 29—'I don't know if we can trust them.' But we do trust them, everyday we trust the ferry workers in BC with our lives when we go on board. As a Salt Spring Island resident, I know that in the case of a fire, a gasoline spill or a dead battery that there is someone there to help me. And I know that I want that person to have the training and experience to help me. I doubt they will want to for less than a decent wage, especially as it takes 8 to 10 years of being on call everyday year round to get a regular position on the ferries.

Hahn himself has been out inspecting the fleet. So having been on board he obviously trusts the union, at least with his life.

Tina Kempling, Salt Spring Island

Thanks, Tina. I hope this edition of Island Tides sets the record straight -Ed.

Who To Blame?

Dear Editor:

Upon announcing a truce in the ferry war, CEO Hahn urged the public to not be nasty to the ferry workers—the inference being that all right-thinking persons blame said workers for the debacle.

Mr. Hahn is misinformed. My wife and I were among those

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who were less than joyful about being stuck for half a day at Tsawwassen, and we had plenty of time to find out who was getting most of the blame from the stranded citizens. It was not the workers. It wasn't even Mr. Hahn, who, it was recognized, was only using the skills for which he had been imported. That leaves the BC Government. Who else could it be?

We've had this government's wretched agenda for two years. Lots of time to recognize the modus operandis as peddling or trashing our public and social services while shouldering its way towards its neo-feudal nirvana of gated communities for the rich, food banks for the working poor, and pepper spray for the unruly homeless.

The realization of these dreams depends, of course, on the delusion that we in BC are a quiescent easily cowed citizenry, horrified by the very thought of disobeying an injunction, however oppressive, however manipulative.

As the ferry workers have demonstrated, such a belief is unfounded. Perhaps the government would do well to ponder something said by Thomas Jefferson, one of Mr. Hahn's most celebrated countrymen— 'I hold that a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical.'

Andrew Gibson, Salt Spring Island

Flawed Coastal Ferries Act

The following was a presentation made to Islands Trust Council on December 6 in Victoria.

I am a Marine Engineer, and have been working for BC Ferries for the past 13 years.

During my career, I have seen many changes in management at BC Ferries. Each time, I have had a glimmer of hope that finally something was going to be done to rein the wastefulness of the current system. In one case, an entire crew was brought in on overtime, to hear a five-minute speech about how things would change, when they never did. All along, BC Ferries employees have screamed for change that has never occurred.

BC Ferry Employees possess a wealth of technical expertise, which is seldom used in the planning and management process. Management has failed to manage effectively, and employees feel they have little chance of effecting positive change. Recently, BC Ferries spent over a quarter of a million dollars on a maintenance rationalization project executed by an outside contractor. The document was so flawed that it was unusable. Revisions to the program were sought ... from ships engineers, engineers that should have been charged with drafting the document in the first place.

My point is that there are a myriad of ways to improve on operational and administrative costs, to make the existing ferry system more efficient, while preserving the benefits of the system and keeping it whole. The problem is, of course, the *Coastal Ferry Act*.

The *Coastal Ferry Act* takes BC Ferries in a direction away

from that of a public transportation infrastructure, and into the domain of a user pay, for-profit service. It discards the advantages to the public of having an integrated service, in favour of the simplicity of off-loading responsibilities for service to private operators, with BCFS ultimately becoming the service integrator. This is their vision, and the *Act* enables it.

While some of you may feel that the BCFMWU preaches gloom and doom regarding the potential of this *Act*, one must ask oneself why this potential exists?

Why is it that the *Act* so clearly and prematurely defines the path to dismantling the system? The stated goal is complete deregulation of each route, once sufficient competition exists. BC Ferry services even has the right to sell our ships, provided they receive the expected rubber stamp approval from Victoria.

The writers of the *Act* defy the principles that form the foundation of what the public feels is important, in favour of a future service rationale based on revenue.

It is my opinion that this system is worth preserving, the public wants it preserved, and it is feasible to preserve, as it is.

The integrated ferry system is elastic, and can accommodate multiple ship movements, breakdowns, and staffing crises, with a minimum disruption to the public because it is whole yet fluid.

Ferry workers, offer our support and technical knowledge of the inner workings of the ferry system to the Islands Trust and Coastal Council. We wish to work together in a complimentary fashion, to address the serious concerns we all have in the direction that our ferry service is headed.

We wish to work with you to find constructive solutions to the problems facing the system.

Together we can ensure that the interests of the public are protected, by lobbying to repeal sections of the *Act* that force the system to be torn apart, if someone else can do it more cheaply.

Repeal sections of the *Act*, which do not reflect the public will, like the elimination of the principle of cross-subsidy.

And above all, include a new section in the *Act* enshrining the right to public advocacy input, beyond FAC's.

I ask for your support, and look forward to working with you. Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

David Gray, Marine Engineer, *Spirit* vessels

The Coming Job Action

This letter was sent to Don Cheshire, BCFS executive on Sunday, December 7, at the beginning of BCFMWU job action.

Hi Don,

You may forward this letter to whomever you wish.

Today, with news of the impending job action ahead, 'D Watch' is carrying on with our normal Sunday duties in a professional manner. The sprinkler system inspections, fire equipment inspections, ramp and vehicle inspections and dolly

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inspections are all being conducted without a word of protest.

I am proud to say we have always conducted ourselves in a professional manner.

When the decision was made to run the Queen of Alberni on a 'C' license, for an indefinite period of time, rather than make the necessary repairs to up the passenger limit, you asked us to hold back foot passengers, who traditionally show up in the last half hour before sailing time, and fill the decks with cars. Every summer weekend and holiday I stood in front of the closed doors myself and faced the insults and abuse of the disgruntled passengers, always in a professional manner. Our response was never in the vein of 'blame management, this is their decision.' We always took the heat and responded courteously.

When the fast-cats were built, despite the objections of many, the employees did their best to make them a success. I have talked to catering staff many times, who have told me stories of facing the same kind of insults and abuse I faced from the travelling public, and they responded with the same professionalism.

When shore staff in Departure Bay were told they could only allow a combination of 10 invalids and infants per sailing, they faced the insults, with professionalism, as well.

You, Don, know how demoralizing it has been for us to hear our new CEO making comments like 'the days of the government bailing out the Ferry Union are over' or 'they have been riding the gravy train for too long.'

The front-line employee has always been the one to face the public abuse when management makes unpopular decisions.

It is unfathomable to us, that we are being told we are the

problem, and the only way to solve the problem is to eliminate some of our jobs and lengthen the hours of work, at less pay, for those who remain.

Despite all that is going on, we will carry on in a professional manner as we always have. I believe our working relationship can remain the same, even though a fence divides us at this time. I do wonder though, if the relationship between the CEO and the employees is repairable.

My feelings are representative of all my workmates.

Bill Degroat, Terminal Supervisor 'D' Watch, Duke Point

What Ferry Strike?

Dear Editor:

A reporter from Toronto called me today and asked me how I was coping without BC Ferries. I had no idea I was without the services of our floating highways.

I do live on an island, but thankfully BC Ferries have not darkened our shores and we don't live like road/ferry/hydro dependent wimps. We all have boats and nobody gives a damn. Most could hold out longer than the BC Liberals ever will.

But I was listening to the yuppies on Hornby Island complain about not being able to drive their SUVs to Courtenay to get their politically correct coffee, not using one, but two ferries and a drive across Denman, an island so dependent on a ferry that it no longer even has a wharf.

There are two distinct types of 'Islanders' in the coastal waters of British Columbia, us and them. Please don't confuse the two.

Robert Saint Amour, Surge Narrows (on beautiful Read Island, a completely ferry-less island) ✍

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