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Bill could adjust compensation for injured apprentices

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editor

Some construction leaders in British Columbia are pleased that legislation introduced last week could adjust the compensation paid to injured apprentices.

Currently, injured apprentices receive benefits, based on their wage at the time of injury, for the first 10 weeks of their temporary disability. After 10 weeks, that rate jumps to the rate of a journeyman.

"They are applying fairness and balance to apprenticeship compensation," said Grant McMillan, president of the Council of Construction Associations (COCA), which acts on behalf of the construction industry in WorkSafeBC matters.

"It took a while, but we're pleased that change is moving forward in the legislature. We've been lobbying on this for years."

He said the source of the steep pay jump was changes made to the Workers Compensation Act in 2002. COCA and its members have been lobbying for changes ever since.

Some injured apprentices double their salary if they are off work for more than 10 weeks.

An apprentice makes about \$14 an hour, while a journeyman can make double that. It would usually take an apprentice about four to five years to reach the journeyman pay scale.

McMillan said that it just isn't fair that a worker sitting at home makes more than a worker on a jobsite.

He also said that the drastic jump in benefits also provides a disincentive for workers to return to the jobsite.

"This is not what the system was designed for," he said.

Bill 14 applies to all apprentices in British Columbia, not just those in the construction industry.

Manley McLachlan, president of the British Columbia Construction Association (BCCA) is also pleased about the proposed amendments. The provincial construction association has long been opposed the compensation pay jump.

"We've been part of the group advocating a revision," he said.

"We'd be happy to see those changes implemented."

However, not everyone in the construction industry is pleased about the proposed amendments.

Tom Sigurdson, executive director the B.C. and Yukon Territory Building and Construction Trades Council, has some concerns.

"I guess that's why they no longer call it 'The Workers Compensation Board'," he said. "They are taking away from those that can least afford it."

He said the move could also discourage people from entering the construction trades at a time when there is huge demand for workers.

The proposed change in policy caught some by surprise.

In July of 2010, a spokesperson for the ministry said that there were no immediate plans to amend the act.

The apprenticeship legislation was introduced, along with other changes to the Workers Compensation Act, by Margaret MacDiarmid, the minister of labour, citizens' services and open government. The changes include:

Broadening compensation coverage for mental stress conditions arising

in the workplace;

Grant survivor benefits to common law couples without children after two years of cohabitation (previously three years);

Confirm the most recent inflation adjustments for compensation and penalty amounts.

The changes have been introduced in an attempt to keep the workers' compensation system responsive to the needs of workers and employers.

"Our government recognizes that we need to treat job-related mental stress the same way we treat physical illness and injuries," said the minister. "We know mental stress has a significant impact on workers, their families and their workplace.

The article is available online at:

<http://www.joconl.com/article/id47471/--bill-could-adjust-compensation-for-injured-apprentices>