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Health science professionals issue strike notice after employers pull a no-show at scheduled bargaining

Bargaining for a new contract for BC's health science professionals was to resume yesterday for the first time since health science professionals delivered a 90 per cent strike vote to support the bargaining committee's proposals for a fair and reasonable collective agreement. Bargaining had broken off October 31.

The employers' bargaining agent, Health Employers' Association of BC (HEABC), called the unions back to bargain Thursday. But as hour after hour passed, the employer did not make an appearance at the bargaining table. While two days of bargaining were scheduled for this week, HEABC reported at 5 p.m. Thursday that its bargaining committee could not guarantee an appearance at the bargaining table until next Friday, November 30.

"Health science professionals are the members of the modern health care team who doctors and nurses depend on to diagnose, treat, and rehabilitate patients. Without us, the health care system cannot work," said HSPBA Chief Negotiator Jeanne Meyers.

"The government has to get serious about making sure that we keep these highly educated and skilled members of the health care team here in BC, instead of losing them to other provinces where they can earn up to \$12 an hour more to do the same job with better working conditions, including enough staff. Adequate staffing levels is a critical element of working conditions since our members are working to fill the gaps created by chronic shortages. HEABC has told us there is currently a shortage of 2,000 health science professionals province-wide. All our members feel the effect of those shortages with increases in workload and stress. And every vacancy means delays in diagnosis and treatment for patients," she said.

HSA President Reid Johnson said during strike vote meetings this month, the union's board of directors and bargaining committee members heard countless stories from members who are worried about the ability of the health care system to maintain quality care for patients.



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“They know that shortages are critical. They know that they risk affecting the quality of care when they don’t get enough rest between long shifts. And they don’t want to shoulder the burden of that risk anymore,” he said.

“Our members have spoken. They were clear. They are prepared to take strike action to back bargaining solutions that help address the growing crisis in health care. The employer’s complete lack of respect for the bargaining process has left us no alternative but to act on our members’ wishes and issue strike notice,” Johnson said.

Under the BC Labour Code, issuing 72 hours strike notice puts the employer on notice that unions will be in a legal strike position 72 hours after issuing the notice. The strike notice is in effect for 90 days from the date of the vote, which was November 19. This means the unions have three months to exercise their right to strike.

“HSPBA plans to be back at the table for the next scheduled week of bargaining December 3 to 7. We are committed to negotiating a fair and reasonable collective agreement. We need to see that commitment from HEABC and the government,” Johnson said.

“While we have issued strike notice to make sure HEABC and government understand health science professionals are serious about getting back to the bargaining table, and disappointed in their negotiators’ clear lack of interest in doing the same, issuing strike notice does not necessarily mean we expect to put picket lines up at health care facilities next week,” Johnson said.

Job action can take many forms, from limiting administrative duties, to a ban on overtime, to study sessions, to full-on withdrawal of service, he said.