

BULLETIN

Rolling up our sleeves for contract negotiations

August 1, 2005

The Report: August / September 2005 vol.26 num.4

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his fall marks the concerted start of preparations for bargaining, as almost every HSA member's collective agreements will be expiring next spring. Contracts for Paramedical Professionals, Nurses, Community Health and Community Social Services all expire at the end of March 2006.

And those are not the only contracts that will be up for renewal. Government workers and teachers will also be in at the table to secure new collective agreements — all of which makes for a very crowded bargaining scene.

Preparations for 2006 public sector discussions are set against the current backdrop of a number of high-profile labour disputes. Members of the TWU have been locked out by their employer, Telus, for more than a month, with contracting out being a key issue. Negotiations between striking Steelworkers and Teck Cominco in Trail are deadlocked as the company demands concessions on pensions and post-retirement benefits; and CBC workers were locked out in August as the public broadcaster pushes for increased contracting out of work.

HSA members face many of the same issues.

In health care, the government has put in place legislation that allows for contracting out of many services. While the initial impact on health care has largely been the contracting out of nutrition and cleaning services, the legislation has the potential for a wider application. Members, along with the public, have expressed legitimate concerns about the effects of the current level of contracting out as hardly a week goes by that you don't hear about the deteriorating quality of food and cleanliness in our hospitals. HSA members have been dealing with the effects first hand and have often found themselves in the role of advocates for patients and their families.

In community health and community social services, where agencies are responsible for delivering services funded by the government, members are experiencing uncertainty as agencies struggle to juggle fiscal demands of the government and client needs, opting in some instances to drop programs they can no longer afford to deliver — leaving clients with no place to turn, and the workers they rely on without work.

In both sectors, the level of frustration and tension as well as increasing workload has also led to increased experiences with and concerns about violence and injury in the workplace.

Your experiences in the workplace will be the key to informing the priorities of your bargaining committees and for most members that work begins in earnest this fall. For registered psychiatric nurses, the work began

with the election of a focus group and bargaining representatives at the 2005 Annual Convention. Work is already under way to identify bargaining priorities for members in the community social services and community health support. For paramedical professionals, delegates attending this year's regional meetings will select representatives to attend the bargaining proposal conference which will be scheduled later this year.

And, in addition, education courses with a focus on preparing for bargaining will be held in conjunction with the Regional Meetings. Topics will include writing bargaining proposals, media training, and building awareness of your issues in your community.

Bargaining collective agreements takes a lot of preparation. The negotiations that take part at the table are just the finished product of many months of work on the part of many, including you! We're well on our way to getting ready for this next round of contract talks. 

Cindy Stewart is president of the Health Sciences Association of BC.

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