

Government continues to attack community social services

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he Union Bargaining Association (UBA) and the Community Social Services Employers Association (CSSEA), began talks during the first week of October to negotiate a new collective agreement covering nearly 15,000 workers in the community social services sector. Talks have proceeded slowly and cautiously in this very complex round of bargaining in a difficult political environment.

For the most recent info on bargaining and the community social services campaign, check out the UBA website at www.cssinfo.ca, or call the bargaining hotline at (604)473-5444 (lower mainland) or 1(800)335-5665 (toll free in BC).

Community social services workers provide critical services to families, people with physical or developmental disabilities, youth and children, aboriginal people, and women in crisis. HSA members in this sector include those working in transition houses for women and children fleeing abusive relationships, in residential treatment programs for young offenders and in child development centres with children with developmental disabilities.

It is expected that through this round of bargaining, all of the current collective agreements will be merged into a master agreement for each of the three bargaining units: community living, general services, and aboriginal services. Once a tentative agreement is reached, it will be put before the members for a vote. Although most collective agreements expired March 31, they remain in full force and effect until a new agreement is reached.

With skill and strength: supporting every community
Community social service workers provide a wide range of critically-important services, including:

- assist people with physical or developmental disabilities such as Down Syndrome or autism to live with dignity, respect and independence in their own neighbourhoods;
- assist immigrant families adjust to a different life;
- staff crisis centres and provide suicide intervention services;
- help women and their children fleeing abusive homes by providing temporary accommodation in transition houses;
- provide sexual assault response, counselling and advocacy.
- provide counselling, support and parental guidance to children and parents when a family breaks down;
- teach young people life skills like anger management, grocery shopping and how to get a job;
- provide support and assistance to First Nations families and communities.

The UBA is comprised of 13 unions representing unionized workers in the community social services sector. Seven of these unions, including HSA, participate on the bargaining team that represents all UBA members. CSSEA represents employers who receive most of their funding through contracts with various government ministries to provide community social services. The principal Ministry funding such contracts is the Ministry for Children and Family Development (MCFD), which has had its funding cut by over \$100 million since the provincial Liberals took office, and which must cut an additional \$70 million from its budget over the next three years. MCFD has made it clear that they expect community social service workers to bear the burden of a large proportion of these cuts.

In addition to huge funding cuts, the government has made significant changes to the administrative structure in community social services. Further restructuring has been put on hold following extensive criticism that the government was throwing the entire system into chaos by trying to cut funding, and restructure service delivery, at the same time.

HSA spokesperson Josef Rieder said these negotiations come at a critical time. -The Campbell Liberals legislative assault on our members, ripping up their contract and robbing them of hard-won rights, combined with deep funding cuts, has resulted in fewer services for families and children in need, and increased pressure on workers to deliver services with limited resources," he said.

-The governments actions are threatening our members jobs and putting children and families at risk. Our members have told us they need a collective agreement that provides fair compensation, employment security for workers, and ensures service stability for the thousands of British Columbians who rely on the vital care workers provide in their communities."

During formal opening remarks, the Community Social Services Employers Association made strong statements about requiring 10 per cent concessions from collective agreements. The employer responses to the UBAs non-monetary proposals took this concessionary stance even further, in a broad attack on members working conditions and job security.

The employer initially sought to eliminate well-established harassment complaint procedures and still proposes to do away with all contracting out protection. In addition, they propose the re-instatement of 24 hour live-in shifts and the reduction of other hours of work protections. Also of significant concern is the employers proposal to introduce the term -suitable" as a requirement in all job vacancy provisions. The effect of this proposal would be to virtually eliminate seniority rights that currently provide enormous employment security

benefits to all members in the sector.


The employer subsequently tabled a detailed monetary package that contains rollbacks in nearly every monetary provision of the collective agreement. Overall, employers are demanding a 10 per cent cut in the cost of current contract provisions, which would remove \$35 million from members pockets. In addition, the employer wants to put back on the table the final distribution of job evaluation plan money agreed to during the last round of bargaining, which was to be paid back to October 2002.

The Union Bargaining Association rejects this approach, and has applied to the Labour Relations Board to appoint an arbitrator to force the employer to apply this JEP money to the appropriate classifications, as previously agreed.

The UBA has committed to an aggressive bargaining schedule, and will continue to negotiate non-monetary provisions until the point where monetary discussions are seen to be appropriate. The UBA strongly believes that the community social services sector has already been gutted, deserves increased funding and that the public supports this position.

To support the unions efforts at the bargaining table, the UBA is working with communities affected by the service cuts to educate the public about the important work our members do, and to pressure the Campbell Liberals into restoring funding for community social services. The UBA bargaining committee is encouraging members to lobby for support from clients and their families, community leaders, municipal councils, and MLAs. Such community support is critical, as seen in the successful community campaigns to halt the privatization of the Coquihalla highway.

Members are also asked to help identify real-life stories about the cuts in their community and how they are affecting clients. Its important to share these stories with the public. They can be anonymous, if necessary, but its better if clients or their families are prepared to speak with the media. Please send this information to css_stories@yahoo.ca, or contact Carol Riviere at the HSA office.

HSA members working in health care are urged to support our community social services members. You can start by signing one of the postcards on the UBAs website at www.cssinfo.ca, and e-mailing it to Premier Campbell. Look for the UBA campaign in your community for ways to lend further support. 

HSAs representatives at the community social services bargaining table

Pat Jacklin (crisis intervention / childrens support worker, Comox Valley Transition Society)

Michaela Wooldridge (infant development consultant, Peace Arch Community Services)

Earon Kavanagh (counsellor, SHARE Family and Community Services)

Ryan Barlow (family counsellor, Deltassist Family and Community Services)

Josef Rieder (HSA senior labour relations officer)

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