

Government interference in bargaining must stop

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ith the Paramedical Professional bargaining proposal conference set for February 9-11, and indications that bargaining for this contract, which covers the majority of HSA members, will get under-way early in the new year, the continuing trend to government interference in contract negotiations concerns me.

2003 finished with a rocky end to negotiations between the BC Ferry and Marine Workers Union and BC Ferries, as well as IWA ... Canada and Forest Industrial Relations. In the former case, through the resilience of ferry workers who defied cooling-off legislation and put up picket lines, as well as the support of the BC Federation of Labour in tense negotiations, the two parties agreed to a binding arbitration process that will result in a collective agreement. In the latter case, government put an end to a four-week strike with back-to-work legislation and the appointment of mediator Don Munroe to hammer out an agreement by mediation or binding arbitration by May 31.

In contract talks between the Union Bargaining Association (UBA) and the Community Social Services Employers Association (CSSEA), progress is extremely slow. It is increasingly clear that government has a great deal of influence in those negotiations, and our representatives at the bargaining table continue to hear rumours about government re-tendering contracts for services in order to avoid dealing with unionized service providers.

It is difficult to look back at the past two and a half years and recall a collective agreement that has been reached without government intervention ... especially in the public sector.


Since the PPBA contract was imposed by the Liberal government in the summer of 2001, HSAs priority has been to address the damage done in that process. Our labour relations and legal staff have been working with our members throughout the province to address grievances resulting from the changes to the contract, as well as changes to the system.

I have also worked with senior level management in all the Health Authorities to address concerns about local issues, and to develop pro-active solutions to staffing and other contract issues. We continue to be in contact with the Provincial Lab Coordinating Office established to oversee changes to lab services in the province. It is unclear what impact the recent Supreme Court decision overturning government legislation that reduced out-patient lab fees will have, but whatever the outcome, we will be fully engaged in whatever process unfolds, ensuring that our members interests are represented.

It is safe to say that for the past two and a half years in a difficult climate, HSA has had the best interests of our members in mind as we worked with local employers to address the needs of a health care system under extreme financial pressure.

That hard work has had pay-offs. Local issues have been addressed, and weve had some success in making sure that sober consideration is given when decisions are being made about HSA members work.

Throughout this time, our efforts have been made with an eye to developing a labour relations climate that contributes to collegial negotiations and contract development. We do not enter this coming bargaining cycle wanting a repeat of our last negotiations ... and it would be our hope that HEABC would feel the same. HSAs priority is to negotiate a contract in the spirit that negotiation calls for ... give and take that results in a collective agreement that both parties can support.

Its time that a contract be truly and freely negotiated by both parties without interference by government. 

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