

Contract negotiations a delicate balancing act

April 1, 2004

The Report: April / May 2004 vol.25 num.2

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ith contract negotiations in the health care sector getting their fair share of media and public interest in the past few months, there has been an increased awareness and curiosity about HSA's major collective agreement, the Paramedical Professional Bargaining Association contract with the Health Employers Association of BC.

The bargaining association has had several negotiating sessions since HSA's Bargaining Proposal Conference in February. At that conference, delegates who were elected to represent members from throughout the province set priorities for the bargaining committee to guide our decision-making on your behalf throughout negotiations.

HSA's representatives on the paramedical bargaining committee have a very clear mandate from the membership to defend the right of health science professionals to deliver quality care to patients. Your bargaining committee members understand the challenges you face at work — from shortages in your professions, to uncertainty as a result of reorganization or anticipated change, to reduced staffing.

The PPBA bargaining committee includes representation from the Paramedical Professional Bargaining Association, which represents approximately 13,000 health science professionals who are members of the Health Sciences Association, BC Government and Service Employees' Union, Canadian Union of Public Employees, Professional Employees' Association, and the Hospital Employees' Union.

The PPBA bargaining committee has made a commitment to conduct the current round of negotiations at the bargaining table — not in the media. Contract negotiations are a very delicate balancing act, and this particular round of bargaining promises to be very challenging. While other bargaining associations have chosen to play out negotiations in the public domain, including posting their and the employer's positions on websites, the PPBA's approach is to keep the negotiations at the bargaining table.

There is give and there is take in negotiations. The PPBA has entered this round of negotiations prepared to hear from the employer what challenges they are facing, and how we can work together to meet those challenges. We have also gone into these negotiations telling HEABC about the challenges we are facing. We're telling the employers about the challenges you have everyday at work — from finding the staff to deliver the quality service, to addressing the problem of on-call requirements. We are talking to them about your concerns about reorganization, and we are calling on them to work with us to find ways to address those concerns.

Our approach is aimed at getting to a negotiated agreement that meets the needs of both parties. We want to hear from the employer, and the employer is hearing from us, about the problems in the workplace. We want frank discussion and an honest attempt at problem-solving. To keep lines of communication open, there has to

be comfort on all sides of the table that discussions have a long-range goal of getting to a fair agreement. And if either side becomes too entrenched in an issue too quickly, or interprets early positions and discussion as a fait accompli, we hamper the ability to have that discussion. Holding negotiations in public – through the media or on public web sites – would be an obstacle to frank exchanges.

So far, in the early stages of negotiations, we are making progress. We are having productive discussion about issues important to our members, including the future of health labour relations after the expiry of Bill 29.

Perhaps HSA can be seen as going against the grain of health contract negotiations in BC. That may be the case.

But we are not in contract negotiations to contribute to a wider political campaign – we’re doing that in other areas of our union through a successful web-based lobbying effort and a print advertising campaign across the province. We have members actively working to ensure elected officials don’t ignore the issues that matter to HSA members.

We are in contract negotiations to do what you have a union for: to defend and enhance your collective agreement rights, and to serve as your bargaining agent in negotiations on wages and working conditions.

When nine professional groups got together in 1971 to form HSA, the impetus for the creation of the union was to build a common front to deal with the employer. We are, 33 years later, doing exactly what those health science professionals set out to do. We will continue to take your interests to the bargaining table and conduct negotiations in a professional manner to ensure those interests are reflected in a collective agreement.

As long as the discussion is frank between the parties, and we can make substantive progress on issues, then we will stick to our commitment, in fact, our obligation, to negotiate in good faith. If bargaining breaks down, clearly we will have to assess our position.

We don’t believe it is to our members’ advantage to have our negotiations conducted in the public domain. Initial and opening positions are just that: somewhere to start from. It is the final product that counts, and your bargaining committee is intent on negotiating a package that all members can vote on.

Your bargaining committee was elected at the Bargaining Proposal Conference where delegates from across the province agreed to a series of objectives for bargaining.

The committee members were all in attendance at that conference, and are aware of the membership’s desires. You have elected extremely competent and diligent bargaining committee members who will represent the needs of the membership very well throughout negotiations. 

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