

Supporting HSA members in making a difference

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s is the case with many unions representing professional, public sector employees, HSA and its members have become more active in the political arena. As an organization, and as individuals, HSA members have become increasingly vocal about government decisions which affect their patients and clients, and which affect themselves as health care and community social services workers.

We have worked with, educated, and lobbied the politicians and government staff who make and implement these decisions. We have spoken out publicly on issues affecting our members, and the patients and clients we care for. When all else has failed, we have engaged in job action and political protest to demonstrate our commitment, and to pressure government to make better decisions.

In 1991, HSA's Executive Council presented a controversial position paper to the annual convention on "The Union's Involvement in Political and Human Rights Issues". The paper provided the rationale for several resolutions asking convention delegates to approve HSA becoming involved in human rights and political issues, albeit without affiliating to a particular political party. One of the most controversial resolutions asked members to authorize HSA to provide limited financial support for members working on provincial and federal election campaigns, where the candidate and party involved supported issues important to HSA and its members. These resolutions were hotly debated, and passed by a narrow margin.

Adopting this position paper and the accompanying resolutions, especially the resolution to assist members to become involved in electoral politics, marked a watershed in HSA's political involvement.

For the next three years, every convention debated and defeated at least one resolution to revoke the union's authority to support members working on election campaigns. Over the following decade, members came to realize the importance of working to elect government representatives who will support progressive legislation, particularly in the areas of health care, labour relations, labour standards, and human rights.

The actions of the provincial Liberals since their election three years ago, have accelerated this process. The provincial government has interfered with free collective bargaining to an unprecedented degree, legislating striking workers (including HSA members) back to work, imposing contracts, and legislatively stripping contracts of provisions that took years to achieve. The Liberals have created a serious imbalance in the province's labour relations regime, heavily weighting the system in favour of employers. They have seriously weakened employment standards legislation, introducing a \$6 an hour "training wage," and diluting previous limitations on child labour.

The provincial Liberals have also weakened BC's human rights enforcement system, by eliminating the provincial Human Rights Commission. The provincial government continues to strip hundreds of millions of dollars from community social services, and together with the federal government, refuses to adequately fund and manage the health care system, leaving HSA members struggling to continue to provide quality care.

HSA members saw the writing on the wall soon after the provincial election. At the 2002 convention, members put forward and passed a resolution directing the union's Political Action Committee to add lobbying to its mandate. Members followed this up by putting forward and passing a resolution at last year's convention directing HSA to increase the support it provides to members engaging in electoral politics. Members directed the union to support members working on approved municipal election campaigns, and to consider supporting members running as candidates at all three levels of government.

HSA's Political Action Committee and Board of Directors are asking this year's Convention to debate and vote on several resolutions to enable HSA to support members' growing involvement in electoral politics. These resolutions include:

- Providing financial support to members running as candidates at all three levels of government, where both the member and his/her party (if applicable) support issues important to HSA and its members.
- Increasing the amount of financial support HSA can provide to members working on approved election campaigns.
- Providing financial support to members to attend non-partisan campaign schools, which teach participants how to run election campaigns, as well as what's involved if they want to run for office.
- Authorizing a one-time increase for 2005, in the amount of money HSA can spend to support members' involvement in electoral politics (the "political action fund"). This increase is being requested for 2005 as there will be both a provincial election, and province-wide municipal elections that year. The resolution proposes that the political action fund for 2005 be increased from 0.5 per cent to 0.7 per cent of annual revenue (from approximately \$44,000 to approximately \$62,000).

HSA members have recognized the value of using our political voice. This year's convention will be asked to give the union the tools to support our members who are working to elect representatives who will support progressive legislation, particularly in the areas of health care, labour relations, labour standards, and human rights. 

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