

BULLETIN

## Health and social service cuts: members share ideas on fighting back

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**ision. Values. Voice.** It was the theme of the Health Sciences Association's 31st annual convention held in Burnaby April 11 to 13.

And HSA members opened the convention with strong voices. Members from around the province told delegates about the work they have been doing in their communities.

Tricia Moore, a medical technologist and HSA chief steward at Port Hardy, is president of the Mt. Waddington Labour Council. She said the labour council has become a key place for members of the community to turn to organize co-ordinated activities in reaction to government policies.

She said the focus for the coming year will be to work through the labour council and in the community to identify candidates and elect representatives to the local municipal council.

"If you can get two people on council — one to move and one to second — that gives you an opportunity to get issues heard and debated by local government," she said.

Moore encouraged HSA members to get involved in their local labour council to ensure HSA voices are heard.

Two community social services workers, youth and family counsellor Suzanne Bennett, and program worker Sharon Geoghegan, told delegates about the work they are involved with in Campbell River. Bennett had just received lay-off notice and was actively involved in the local "Community Coalition for Justice."

She encouraged all members to seek out, or start up, similar groups in their communities.

"I will use this challenging time to do the best I can do. We are so much more than this government believes we are," she said.

Geoghegan also encouraged delegates to get involved, and demonstrated her activism with actions, distributing a "pink slip" for delegates to send to their MLAs.

Murray Shaw, a social worker in Vernon, discussed his experiences in the aftermath of the introduction of Bill 29, compared to his previous involvement in community social action against the government as chair of the Solidarity Coalition in Vernon in the early 1980s.

"It felt a lot like pushing against a river — a lot of effort and exhausting." But, he said everybody has a responsibility to speak up and get involved if they want the government to hear their concerns.

In particular, Shaw said writing just one letter to the editor of the local newspaper can open doors. He told

delegates that after one of his letters was published, he was flooded with invitations to speak to various groups, including churches and the local rotary club.

Port McNeil physiotherapist Joseph Kubinec described his one-person campaign to get the government's attention on the severe shortage of physiotherapy services in his community, where \$10,000 signing bonuses were left unclaimed, as no professionals could be attracted to the community. He was the lone physiotherapist in the hospital, and there were no private physiotherapists practising there.

He advocated one-on-one meetings with MLAs, management, CEOs and anybody else who might listen.

He recounted one of his tactics had been to contact business leaders in the community and explain the consequences of fewer services in the community. "You're going to have to send your workers to Campbell River for services, and that's going to cost you," he said.

Kubinec has since left Port McNeil for a job in Alberta.

Janice Morrison, a physical therapist at Kootenay Lake Regional Hospital, has been an activist in many aspects of her life – as an HSA chief steward and member-at-large, a board member on the Physiotherapy Association of BC, and a municipal councillor in Nelson.

She reminded delegates that they and all the members are the union.

"Activism is about telling your story, at every opportunity, through and with any resource available to you," she said.

She encouraged members to seek out other union activists and work together. "One Friday I sat down with HEU, BCNU and IBEW and in a couple of hours we had a handout and a poster. The following Friday we had a protest with around 200 in attendance."

#### Convention resolutions

Delegates to the 31st annual convention of the Health Sciences Association of BC considered resolutions on a number of topics ranging from health care issues to finance and governance.

The tone was set for the two-day convention with delegates' unanimous support of an extraordinary resolution to authorize the union to draw from the Defence Fund to cover the external costs of the legal challenge to Bill 29.

"If we don't find a way to overturn Bill 29, the rest of it doesn't matter, because we don't exist as a union in this province," said Barb Parker from St. Mary's Hospital in New Westminster.

Debate concerning the union's governance resulted in delegates approving several constitutional and policy directions:

- Regions, which in the past mirrored the health regions set by the provincial government, will return to the previous process of being determined by the Board of Directors with consideration of geographic and numerical factors.
- Members-at-large will be elected at regional meetings, not at the annual convention.
- The union will continue to hold annual conventions.
- A review of the dependent care policy will be undertaken to ensure barriers to participation in HSA functions are erased.
- In future bargaining proposal conferences, convention delegates elected to represent multi-agreement chapters have the authority to participate in the process to determine Paramedical Professional Bargaining Association bargaining proposal conference delegates.
- The mandate of the union's political action committee was expanded to include activity in non-election years and lobbying.

With government's changes in health care and other government services having such an impact on members, delegates discussed the need for the union and members to speak out on issues of concern. Resolutions were

passed to direct the union to do the following:

- Explore strategies that develop working relationships with the new regional health authorities.
- Encourage regional and social service employers to maintain policies that recruit and retain health science professionals.
- Lobby health and social service employers to ensure that HSA members are given clinical support and the necessary education for new and restructured jobs.
- Lobby the provincial government for full funding for community-based and home-based services.
- Communicate to employers about the importance of supporting and providing programs that promote the mental, physical and social well-being of the employee.
- Lobby the government to provide assistance to help defray the extra cost to those persons for whom enteral feeding is their primary source of nutritional support.
- Work to educate the government, health authorities and employers about how the assignment of employees based on the specialty needs of the area and the specialty training and experience of the employees ensures quality and efficiency of care and patient safety.
- Continue its involvement in the broader labour movement to lobby the provincial government to put the public good first.

Delegates considered issues related to bargaining experiences of the past and anticipated the future in debating a number of resolutions related to contracts and bargaining. The following actions were endorsed:

- Lobby the provincial government to develop a central registry similar to that already in place for doctors and nurses, where HSA members can voluntarily register for the purpose of providing relief.
- Use polling if required to seek advice of the membership if major obstacles arise in bargaining.
- Review the job action pay policy, paying special attention to reimbursement for hours worked by the job action committee and the development of clear, concise, and practical rules which must be met in order to qualify for picket pay.
- Establish more concrete guidelines for fair and equitable essential service levels across the province.
- The creation of a task group to investigate the most effective means of combating market-driven age adjustments using strategies that promote the skills, knowledge and education of our members.

A number of resolutions were passed directing the union to take an active position on a number of issues.

- Explore effective strategies that educate HSA members and the public with regard to the diversity of our membership and the crucial services they deliver.
- Continue to work with the BC Federation of Labour to strongly oppose the actions of the provincial government.
- Make public responses to the government's changes to public services and advertise as necessary to ensure the public is informed of the impact of changes.
- Support campaigns to educate and solicit support for the cause of keeping the public health care system publicly funded.
- Issue more bulletins for bargaining units outside the Paramedical Professional Bargaining Association contract.
- Investigate the MSP billing process including professional fees that will be charged if small facilities close and testing is moved to larger urban centres.
- Demand that the provincial government support and maintain the Workers' Compensation Board Occupation Health and Safety Regulations for health care workers.

#### BCFL urges action

Jim Sinclair, President of the BC Federation of Labour, told delegates to the 31st annual convention of the Health Sciences Association that now is the time to work together to oppose the Liberal government.

He described the government's actions since election May 16, 2001 as "a betrayal of voters' trust," adding that HSA members were the first to face that betrayal when a two-tiered contract was imposed on health science professionals through legislation.

Sinclair said the spring legislative session would bring more attacks on British Columbians.

Up for review is the Employment Standards Act, legislation governing the Workers' Compensation Board and the Labour Code.

On the changes to the Employment Standards Act, which provides minimum standards for all workers in BC whether or not they are in a union, Sinclair said the government is attacking the most vulnerable.

"It turns out the big economic crisis in this province was people making \$8 an hour," he said, referring to the government's introduction of a \$6 an hour minimum wage for new workers.

Changes to the Labour Code are being driven by a business community that has lobbied non-stop to weaken protections for union members. Sinclair quoted a recent study conducted by McMaster University researcher Charlotte Yates, which found that in British Columbia in a two-year period in 27 per cent of union organizing drives, individuals working to bring the union to their workplace were fired. That is evidence, he said, that employers have the advantage in labour laws. Changes to the legislation will make matters even worse for union members, he said.

Sinclair called on HSA members to continue to work together with other union members, and in their communities to oppose the Liberal government's agenda. 

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