

BULLETIN

Bargaining process disappoints

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by REID JOHNSON

As a first-time member of a negotiating committee, I looked forward to the round of bargaining for a new collective agreement.

I believed that as an active union member, the unions secretary-treasurer, and a trained social worker I would bring to the table a combination of skills that would make a difference. I wanted to use my skills to help conclude a collective agreement for HSA members that would have a positive impact on a system that is suffering.

I had been fore-warned about the process of bargaining. People told me this is probably exactly the origin of "hurry up and wait." But I respect the importance of negotiations: the importance of allowing interested parties to absorb information, process it and take small steps to feel their way through the beginning of a relationship.

Negotiations in labour relations is a delicate process. It has been described as a painters canvas ... not enough tension and the canvas sags; too much tension and the canvas rips.

This is what I was looking forward to ... a process where the employer and the union felt their way through that delicate balance until they found the place where give and take was possible without upsetting the scales.

I have to admit: I was naïve.

There wasnt a lot of interest at the negotiating table for this romantic notion of negotiating I had in my mind. It was clear from the very first day that the Health Employers Association of BC had a different approach to bargaining. That is, their approach to bargaining was: dont do it.

From the outset, the union bargaining association made it clear that our objectives were simple and straightforward. That this round of bargaining had to be about the mandate we had received at the bargaining conference. At that bargaining conference, members told us the priority was a significant wage increase. You wanted a wage increase that would recognize your value to the system. And, you told us, that after so many years of parity with the nurses many of you work side by side with every day a wage increase had to be in line with any offer to nurses.

We waited for four months before the employer would make its position on wages known. And that was only after we had threatened to call the talks off and invited a mediator to try to assist us in the talks. After four months, a 90 per cent strike vote and a strong convention that included a vocal rally by HSA members, the employer finally tabled a wage offer in May: 2, 2, and 1.5 per cent for all health science professionals, with temporary bonuses for certain professions.

And that was, essentially, it for negotiations.

The employer put their offer on the table, checked another day off on the countdown to election day and walked away.

Only when our members continued to push and make clear your support for the bargaining team through job action, did the employer make a change. And they didnt even have the decency to do it at the bargaining table. They sent a message through the mediator that the temporary wage increase for some professions would be put on the wage scale.

I leave this round of -bargaining" disillusioned. I believed I had a contribution to make. I believed that what it would take for HEABC to come to its senses and negotiate was a rational, respectful bargaining process that would result in a mutually agreed upon collective agreement.

But Im not disillusioned about my union. After meeting with many of you throughout the course of job action, and reading about our members in the media, I leave this process buoyed by the strength of the membership and the support you gave the committee.

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