

BULLETIN

The fight is on - better wages for a better health care system

July 1, 2001

The Report: July / August 2001 vol.22 num.3

HSA members at the Paramedical Professional Bargaining Table and the Nursing Bargaining Table have been legislated back to work □ but the fight is far from over.

HSA President Cindy Stewart, speaking on behalf of the health science professionals covered by the Paramedical Professional Bargaining Association contract, said it best at a news conference June 20: □Based on our fundamental goal to achieve a collective agreement, we are directing our members to return to work at 6 am [on June 21.] But we expect to see an offer that allows us to achieve a collective agreement that values our members□ work.□

Many health care professionals in BC have been working without a contract since the provincial paramedical and nurses□ collective agreements expired March 31. Since bargaining broke down this spring, health professionals have been increasing the pressure on employers and on the government. To back demands for a necessary wage increase, nurses imposed an overtime ban beginning the Easter long weekend, and health science professionals began job action on May 22.

Stewart said union activists all agreed that□s what the job action is about. □This has been about getting a collective agreement that values the work of health science professionals in the health care system,□ she said. □That□s what our 90 per cent strike vote gave us: a mandate to go out and get the kind of wages that would address the crisis of shortages in the health science professions. And that continues to be our priority.□

Stewart added that HSA members take job action very seriously. □First and foremost, we□re health professionals. We□re passionate about our jobs, and we tend to put the welfare of our patients and clients ahead of ourselves,□ she said.

□It takes a tremendous amount of frustration to bring our members to a point where they feel compelled to act. And in these past few weeks, we have seen incredibly enthusiastic, creative and determined job action.□

Rick Lampshire, HSA□s chief negotiator for the paramedical professional bargaining table, agreed. □We were at an impasse with the Health Employers□ Association of BC. They were just not listening. They even went so far as to tell us that unreasonable amounts of overtime were not an issue for our members, despite evidence to the contrary.□

In just one example, Lampshire described the situation in the respiratory therapy department at Royal Columbian Hospital. In the two weeks leading up to job action, members were booked for 30 pre-scheduled overtime shifts, as well as having had to work 10 overtime shifts to cover for colleagues who were sick.

Unrecognized overtime is also prevalent, as members often work through their lunch and other breaks and will work past the scheduled end of their shift to complete their work.

On May 22, health science professionals across BC implemented an overtime ban, leaving hospital managers scrambling desperately to fill shifts. On the same day, members in the Kootenays withdrew their services to essential service levels and rallied in Nelson to raise awareness of the issues facing health science professionals.

Stewart told the Nelson rally that after three months of negotiations, as well as several days of mediation, the employer still refused to take health science professionals' bargaining demands seriously. "In mid-May, Gary Moser – CEO of HEABC – said health science professionals are not worth wage increases being offered to other health care professionals," she said.

Subsequently, thousands of members around BC held regional rallies, gathering in Kelowna, Victoria, Prince George, and Vancouver.

In Kelowna, close to 400 members in the Thompson-Okanagan region demonstrated in force to demand that employers raise their current wage offer of two per cent, two per cent, and cost of living adjustment over the next three years. Members marched from Kelowna General Hospital to rally at Jubilee Bowl, and were joined by busloads and carpools of members from around the region.

In Victoria, more than 700 members rallied on the lawn and front steps of the provincial legislature to call on the government to treat them fairly and provide a mandate for the employer to return to the table with a competitive wage offer. Two days later, on May 31, hundreds of members marched from Prince George Regional Hospital to rally in front of city hall. Members across the region held local rallies, such as in Smithers, or participated in creative job action in communities like Dawson Creek, Fort St. John, and Williams Lake.

The following day, despite a torrential downpour, thousands of health science professionals rallied in downtown Vancouver. HSA members from all over the Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley filled the lawns of the Vancouver Art Gallery, with members from the other four unions in the paramedical professional bargaining association (BCGEU, HEU, CUPE, and PEA). At this rally, Stewart released details of the subsequent week's job action: service withdrawals by professional discipline.

During the first two weeks in June, health science professionals staged rotating withdrawals of service highlighting their critical role in providing diagnostic, clinical and rehabilitation services in every community around the province. Thousands of members engaged in creative and interesting job action, including donating blood, registering to become bone marrow donors, producing information leaflets on individual professions, delivering food for the food bank, leafleting in malls, volunteering with community agencies and writing to MLAs and local papers about the issues health science professionals face every day on the job. Morale was extremely high, and members around the province could look forward to reports about HSA members' activities in every newscast.

Beryl McNeil, Chief Steward at Tumbler Ridge Health Centre, said members were enthusiastic about their job action. "It went really well – we leafleted the whole community, and worked on public awareness of our issues," she said. "We made the public aware of our situation, and they were very sympathetic – behind us 100 per cent! It was really encouraging, and the members here were excellent."

"Many of us were new to any kind of job action, so there were lots of questions and uncertainty, but it was enjoyable. We had excellent support from the HSA office," she said. "It was a real learning experience, but the members were all very enthusiastic. It was great."

That enthusiasm was apparent right across the province. At Queen Alexandra Centre for Children's Health in Victoria – a facility that has always been exempt from job action – members organized marches to the offices of the Ministers of Health, Labour and Finance to press for government to change the HEABC's wage mandate.

Then on June 18, the Liberal government entered into the dispute: after only days in office, they announced that they would be legislating health sector workers back to work. The legislature was recalled June 19 to force health science professionals back to work, and nurses to work overtime.

This announcement only served to galvanize HSA members. In response to the government's move, health science professionals moved to full-scale service withdrawals instead of the gradual, strategic withdrawals as planned.

Stewart joined members at strike headquarters at Burnaby Hospital and BC Women and Children's Hospital. "This proposed legislation is heavy-handed and curtails collective bargaining rights," she told members and the media. Interest in the story was nation-wide, coinciding with labour unrest in the health sectors of several provinces across the country — most notably Nova Scotia, where the government was on the eve of passing even more restrictive back-to-work legislation.

At BC Women and Children's Hospital, members walked off the job for the first time in the union's history, setting aside historical exemptions. "This only demonstrates how frustrated our members are," Stewart said.

"We call on the government to end this dispute by providing health employers a mandate to bargain a competitive wage increase in good faith — not to rob us of our right to free collective bargaining."

The HSA Board of Directors was faced with a dilemma when the *Health Care Services Continuation Act* was passed early in the morning of June 20. Some members were eager to escalate the strike, but would defying the legislation improve the union's chances of securing a competitive wage increase?

As Stewart told a packed news conference that day, HSA made the difficult decision to direct members to return to work and comply with the legislation. "We had a range of options to consider: everything from embracing the legislation to outright defying it," she said.

"We have not embraced the legislation. We had several legal opinions to consider, including challenging a piece of legislation which we believe has some fundamental flaws."

While challenging the legislation remains an option, Stewart emphasized that achieving a collective agreement remains HSA's main goal. "In the recent election, Gordon Campbell said a Liberal government would be a government that would respect health care professionals. He said we are important. He said we are valuable. Well, Gordon Campbell and his caucus didn't speak for those values last night in the legislature," she said. "But we are willing to give Gordon Campbell a chance to prove himself, and deliver on the promises he made to health care professionals."

The *Health Care Services Continuation Act* allows the Minister of Labour to impose one or more cooling-off periods. The total duration of the periods cannot exceed 60 days. The Act stipulates that the last collective agreement in force is in effect until either the end of the cooling-off period of 50 days as notified, or until a new collective agreement is reached. Further, the *Act* expires on August 31, 2001. In addition to curtailing free collective agreement rights, the new legislation invalidates the members' 90 per cent strike vote cast in April. This means that if contract negotiations are not successful, HSA must conduct another strike vote in order to take further strike action upon the expiration of the cooling-off period.

The paramedical professional bargaining team returned to the bargaining table on June 28 to continue HSA's efforts to get a collective agreement that values the contributions health science professionals make to the health care system.

After meeting with the HEABC and the union bargaining association, special mediator Stephen Kelleher said the parties are too far apart to continue talks. HSA's Board of Directors was scheduled to meet later this month to consider the options available to the union to continue to work to achieving a collective agreement that values the work of health science professionals.

The union thanks members for the determination and courage they have demonstrated during past weeks of job action. Your continued support of the bargaining team will help secure a fair contract. Please continue to check the bargaining hotline [1.877/763.4477 or 515.5499 in Lower Mainland] and this web site for regular updates.

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