

BULLETIN

Common values make HSA strong

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Over 250 delegates rose to their feet at HSAs 28th Annual Convention, after acclaiming Cindy Stewart as President of the Health Sciences Association for a fourth term.

Stewart was visibly moved as she thanked the delegates for their support. -This is a great honour and a privilege. I am so proud to represent HSA," she said. -HSA members have a wealth of talent and ability that is recognized and respected within the labour movement and larger community. I commit to continue my work as President ... representing the views and interests of HSA members ... to the best of my ability."

Stewart's acclamation was just one of many highlights at this year's convention, held May 27 to 29 in Richmond. Delegates debated resolutions on a wide range of topics, from continuing HSAs organizing efforts in the community social services sector, to the impact of regionalization on health care workers and quality of care.

Other resolutions included an emergency resolution to examine HSAs continued affiliation to the National Union of Public and General Employees, and various resolutions that focused on improving current job action policies.

As delegates gathered for convention, 300 of HSAs community social services members were still on strike to back their demands for wage parity with their counterparts in the health sector. And many delegates brought with them stories of their own recent job action experiences during the paramedical professional and nurses strikes earlier this year.

New contracts

Delegates listened intently during the opening plenary session as negotiators from the paramedical, nurses, and community health services and support bargaining tables reported on the recent negotiations in these sectors.

Rick Lampshire, chief negotiator at the paramedical professional bargaining table where HSA members constitute a 90 per cent majority, warned that there are still challenges ahead even though members overwhelmingly ratified the current contract this spring.

-We've made considerable gains in this contract," he said. -Where other public sector unions were locked into a 0-0-2 per cent wage package, we were able to make significant progress in two key areas: on call and long-term disability.

-On call was a big issue for our membership, but the government mandate made any increases in this area extremely difficult to achieve. Through the resolve of the members, we were able to stretch the mandate, and get an increase," he said.

Maureen Whelan, chief HSA negotiator at the nurses bargaining table, reported that registered psychiatric nurses successfully achieved a long-sought goal: better access to jobs, and dual posting of vacant positions. - We were able to get wage parity with RNs, which is very important to our RPNs who work side by side with RNs on the ward," she said.

Lori Horvat, who represented HSA members at the community health services and support bargaining table, briefly outlined the provisions in their new contract. -In addition to retaining our superior benefits, this contract provides the framework for a much-needed classifications system," she said.

Later, in a surprise announcement, HSA President Cindy Stewart told delegates about breaking news: the community social services bargaining team had reached a tentative agreement after weeks of sustained job action.

At press time, community social services members at eight facilities involved in group bargaining were voting on the tentative agreement reached at the end of May.

HSA chief negotiator Julio Trujillo said that if ratified, -social services in this province will never be the same," noting that this is an historic agreement which would finally see community workers receive the same wages as those who perform the same or similar work in the health sector.

Debate highlights

At this years convention, members debated a large number of resolutions concerning job action, stemming from concerns raised during recent strikes and other job action strategies. Delegates gave direction to HSAs Job Action Review Committee, which is instructed to examine all aspects of the recent job actions. Brian Isberg, chair of the new committee, encouraged members to offer their input and recommendations.

-We want to take what weve learned from this round of negotiations and make improvements to current policies," he said.

-In the event that job action is necessary again in the future, we want to ensure we are well prepared. The committee will be looking for input from members. We hope members will return the surveys we sent out, and the job action review committee will be taking these recommendations into account."

One of the most emotional debates at this years convention centred on a resolution calling for HSA to establish a bursary in honour of Ann Hallman, an X-ray technologist and HSA activist whose courage in bringing forward an unprecedented grievance established bumping rights for HSA paramedicals.

Don Chan, chief steward at Victoria General Hospital, made an impassioned speech calling on delegates to pass this resolution.

-Ann Hallman was a young mother, struggling with lung cancer by the time the arbitration award came through establishing bumping rights for HSA members," he said.

-We went to her hospital room to tell her that shed won the arbitration. Unfortunately, she never got to use her

bumping rights, because she shortly passed away."

After considerable debate, members referred the resolution back to the resolutions committee, instructing them to bring back a substitute resolution which would allow HSA to establish criteria and a process to recognize members who have made a significant contribution to HSA. The delegates unanimously passed the substitute resolution, which added that Ann Hallman be the first nominee to be so recognized.

A key resolution noted that although HSA has successfully continued organizing efforts in the community social services sector, workers at many other similar facilities remain without union representation.

Delegates unanimously passed this resolution directing HSA to maintain active organizing initiatives in the community social services sector, and to continue working toward a strong master collective agreement for all community social services facilities.

An emergency resolution submitted by the Board of Directors called on the Board to evaluate the merits of maintaining HSAs affiliation to the National Union. HSA President Cindy Stewart explained that this resolution arose from differences with a sister component due to health care restructuring in BC. -I think its healthy, sometimes, to disagree on things," she said, -and we have managed, with the help of the National Union, to be able to continue to work together on the things that bring us together, and not let the things that break us apart have any kind of long-lasting detrimental effect.

-But when a sister component takes a position that fundamentally strikes at the heart of who we are, and where we came from ... our history, our culture, our structure; when they join with the union who has charged us with raiding at the CLC ... then we have to make some very difficult decisions with respect to whats best for HSA," she said.

Delegates passed this resolution, which means members can look forward to a report on this issue from the Board of Directors at the next Annual Convention in 2000.

Delegates also debated a number of resolutions on occupational health and safety ... obviously an area that has become of great interest and concern to members. Topics included the safe disposal of blood and bodily fluids; education for stewards on the new WCB regulations; and the need to build on the study into the effects of on-call work.

Another turbulent year

In her keynote address, President Cindy Stewart thanked members for their strong support over the course of a very difficult year.

-I want to thank each and every one of you for your tremendous leadership, strength and determination during very turbulent times," she said. -With your support, we were able to achieve collective agreements that take a major step toward reflecting our needs as health care and social services workers.

-This year, not only were we able to develop creative job action strategies that minimized the impact on our patients, clients and the public, but we did it with minimal impact on other workers," she said.

-And we taught the public a valuable truth: that there is more to the delivery of health services than doctors and nurses. By talking about the work you do and what it means to you, you educated the public about the variety and value of the work that HSA members do."

Stewart praised the dedication and courage that members showed during the many challenges of the last few years. -HSA members are bright, articulate, pragmatic and committed. We are diverse enough to bring a variety of erspectives, but cohesive enough to provide meaningful and tangible interventions.

-Our struggles have taught us many things, and whenever a challenge has presented itself, we have risen to that challenge and emerged stronger, tougher, and smarter," she said.

-If we always keep in mind our common values, principles and priorities ... if we remain committed to protecting our unique culture and identity ... I believe we will triumph over the next year and for many more years to come.

-Despite all of the challenges, I have every confidence that HSA is entering the new millennium stronger than ever before."

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