

BULLETIN

Convention 1998: Looking ahead

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More than 250 delegates packed HSAs 27th Annual Convention May28-30, making it the largest on record and demonstrating the continued growth of the union.

Many were attending for the first time, representing workers in the health and social service sectors, and reflecting the unions successful organizing efforts.

"From the new cancer centre in Kelowna to transition houses, from diagnostic and treatment centres to home support, we are continuing to grow as unorganized workers choose HSA to represent them," said President Cindy Stewart in her welcoming address.

The convention dealt with a host of resolutions including continued support for the annual "Run for the Cure"; access to screening and diagnostic mammography; the effects of on-call on workers health; and an historic new constitution (to be sent to members in the September issue of The Report). Delegates were also apprised of the current bargaining situation in which health care employers are seeking major concessions in wages, benefits and job classifications.

Stewart warned that the employers aim is to "drive wages and benefits down to the lowest common denominator." She reminded delegates that the provincial government is the ultimate paymaster and declared that the wage formula of "zero, zero and two with cutbacks to benefits and conditions is just not acceptable.

"No one likes to talk strike, but there are times when strike is the only language that is understood," she stated.

Wages, classifications, job security and provincial seniority are key priorities at the bargaining table, Executive Director of Labour Relations Rick Lampshire told the convention.

"There appears to be a concerted effort to gut our contract," Lampshire said. "Your support at this time is crucial," he stressed, while advising delegates to remember that negotiations were still in the early stages.

Members took a key step in reworking the way they vote on resolutions. In recent years HSA conventions featured a "direct" voting system in which resolutions were introduced by the Resolutions Committee and seconded by a delegate. After strong debate, delegates voted to return to a system whereby the delegates vote on the recommendations of the Resolutions Committee.

The new process got a workout in a subsequent debate on the resolution regarding District Representatives elected for each Regional Health Board and Community Health Council, positions introduced last year in the wake of health care restructuring. The resolution, a reaffirmation of a motion passed at the 1997 convention, allowed the District Representatives automatic delegate status to convention, and stipulated that such delegates be from the health sector.

Delegates sent the resolution back to committee with instructions to strike the reference to health sector and expand eligibility for District Representatives to all HSA members. A further referral deleted the automatic delegate status to convention and instructed the union to further clarify the role and expectations of the District Representative positions.

Guest speaker and new Health Minister Penny Priddy made a commitment to investigate the loss of screening mammography at acute care facilities and its replacement by private, for-profit services. A key resolution committed the union to "lobby the Ministry of Health to reinstate screening mammography as a procedure to be available at publicly funded union facilities."

Another resolution noted that the provincial governments reform of health care has moved services out of acute care facilities without ensuring that proper community-based services are in place. It called on the government to set up a comprehensive system of public home support serviced by qualified unionized workers. Delegates also adopted a resolution urging Victoria to ensure Regional Health Boards and Community Health Councils "use publicly funded union health care services."

Other adopted resolutions centred on transition agreements for members affected by restructuring in the Ministry of Children and Families. HSA is negotiating a transition agreement to protect members jobs as services move to the health sector. One resolution called on HSA to "strongly oppose a requirement for a further probation period when discussing the need for a transition agreement." Another stipulated that HSA chapters be informed "prior to HSA negotiating transition agreements."

In her keynote address, Cindy Stewart noted the confusion surrounding health care reform that sometimes makes members "feel we've been plopped right into the middle of some Dilbert cartoon." But she expressed confidence the union and its staff will deal with the issues surrounding reform and collective bargaining.

She praised the union for its role in successfully delaying the schedule of reforms within the Ministry of Children and Families by working in tandem with other groups such as parents - calling it "a clear example of the effects that concerted and collective action can have."

A round of applause greeted Stewart's acknowledgement that she had just completed one full year as HSA's first full-time president. "Even though I have served in this role for four years and now five, I continue to grow and learn ... it continues to be a role in which I'm tremendously honoured to serve."

HSA members are continuing in record numbers to sign up for labour education courses such as those offered through the Canadian Labour Congress Harrison Winter School and the Summer School for Union Women, as well as attending HSA meetings, Stewart observed. "Even with all the uncertainty and the challenges of the past year, we're doing something right when we see such enthusiasm and interest.

"I know that we are truly blessed with our people resources. Both our staff and our members, you are second to none," Stewart declared.

"I know you feel as I do. It is an honour and a privilege to represent the members of HSA."

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