

BULLETIN

Bargaining marks 35th anniversary

April 1, 2006

The Report: April / May 2006 vol.27 num.2

by CINDY STEWART



his year at our annual convention we will be marking HSAs 35th year as a union.

In 1971, a handful of health professionals formed an association and gained bargaining rights for health science professionals in hospitals.

Now, 35 years later, 14,000 HSA members are concluding a complex set of contract negotiations.

At press time, 12,000 members in the newly renamed Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association were voting on a tentative agreement for a four-year contract expiring in 2010. In addition, the bargaining committees for 600 Community Health Services and Support members; 800 Community Social Service members; and 750 Registered Psychiatric Nurses had just reached tentative agreements.

HSA members were not alone at the bargaining tables. Last fall, the Minister of Finance announced \$1 billion would be available for public sector unions that had tentative agreements in place by March 31, 2006. This deadline served to focus employers and unions in their work at the negotiating table.

The \$1 billion was touted as "bonus" money and negotiators were originally encouraged to be creative in how they used the available funding and to apply it in ways that addressed issues relevant to the respective bargaining units.

The reality was that government was counting on the attractiveness of a one-time signing bonus and was reluctant to agree to anything other than individual cheques for each employee. For health science professionals where HSA is the lead union, the bargaining committee had different intentions.

HSA members had sent the bargaining team to the table with a clear mandate that included addressing the long term disability plan. In the end, they were successful in making progress on all the key objectives identified by the members ... including the LTD.

While the issues were complex, our bargaining committee was able to achieve a tentative agreement that the committee, and your board of directors, believes was the best possible deal with the best long-term outcomes for HSAs health science professionals.

In the past month, tentative agreements have been signed in a number of public sector settings, including the master BCGEU public service contract and the HEU-led facilities sector. The agreements have all been four years in length, and all of them reflect the national trend in public sector bargaining that have mechanisms to

target wage compensation to occupations and professions that are facing competitive pressures.

Collective bargaining is a fine balancing act, and effective collective bargaining is a by-product of constructive relationships and healthy labour relations ... a rare commodity in British Columbia in recent years.

Bargaining in 2006 provided an opportunity for something different. There was money on the table to address neglected issues. We would like to think that the Liberal government has learned that British Columbians value their public services and the health of their communities; but many saw this round of negotiations as a transparent bid to buy labour peace through the next election and past the 2010 Olympics. Fortunately, for the most part, especially where an employer association was capable of negotiating, the governments framework resulted in agreements and provided the parties an opportunity to achieve collective agreements through real collective bargaining.

For HSA, the glaring exception is the social service sector. At every other table, progress was made on issues members sent us to the table to address. But for the signing bonus, there is little in the agreement that address the needs identified by members who deliver services to the most vulnerable in our communities. A dysfunctional employers association stymied any hope of constructive negotiations and creative problem solving. And the government is culpable as they have done nothing to address this long-standing and well-known problem that continues to undermine any hope of constructive labour relations in the community social service sector. However, a tentative agreement was reached prior to the government-set deadline of March 31st as risking the signing bonus was too big a price for workers who are already the lowest paid in the sector. As with all tentative agreements, the members will ultimately decide whether to accept or reject the agreement.

Every set of negotiations has its own challenges, and I want to thank, on behalf of the Board of Directors and all members of HSA our hardworking bargaining committee members for their efforts in this, HSAs 35th year.

Health Science Professional Bargaining Association: Ron Ohmart, Ernie Hilland, Dawn Adamson, Val Avery, Charlene Chen, Joan Magee, Allen Peters, and alternates Mandi Ayers, Bruce MacDonald and Mark Zarembo.

Community Bargaining Association (Community Health Services and Support): Lori Horvat and Charles Wheat

Union Bargaining Association (Community Social Services): Josef Rieder and Pat Jacklin.

Nurses Bargaining Association: Kathy McLennan, Audrey MacMillan and Bruce Wilkins. 

Cindy Stewart is HSA President.

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