

## 25 years of speaking up for members' rights

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**Although Ernie Hilland** says he has learned an immense amount during 25 years of involvement with HSA, back before he joined he already had one thing figured out: he knew how to speak up for his rights. In fact, it was this ability that opened the way for him to become chief steward back in 1981.

Ernie Hilland Region 6 Director Cytotechnologist BC Cancer Agency
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-I had just finished my training and was working in the cytology lab," said Hilland, a cytotechnologist at the BC Cancer Agency. -In the first few weeks on the job, I had a couple of days sick and did not get paid sick time. I questioned it. So I became known to the then-steward as someone who would stand up for his rights," he said.

-When that steward was ready to step down, he asked me if I would consider doing it. I didnt hesitate at all."

Since then, Hilland has been involved in multiple capacities ... board member, vice president, trailblazer in international solidarity work, constituency liaison, representative to the Vancouver District Labour Council, and other positions.

Recently, he took on a new HSA function as the chair of the Health Science Professionals bargaining committee, which took part in negotiating a new collective agreement this March.

-It had always been in the back of my mind that I wanted to do this. Its one of the few things in HSA I havent done," he said.

Hillands first step as part of the bargaining committee was attending the HSA Bargaining Proposal Conference, where representatives of all the various HSA workplaces get together to agree on what they will bargain for. The result is a mandate for HSAs representatives to the Health Science Professional Bargaining Association. Then the various members of the bargaining association need to agree on a position to take forward.

-Theres quite a bit of bargaining amongst our selves before we go to bargain with the employer," Hilland explained. -We have a two-day bargaining proposal conference of HSA members, then one day with the other unions in the bargaining association."

He adds that when specific issues arise during bargaining, the unions work together. -When we meet with the employer, we have a united front. But it may have taken an hour or two to get there."

The next step involves spending a month holed up in a hotel with representatives of the Health Employers Association of British Columbia. This round, the provincial government imposed a deadline of March 31 for contracts wanting a portion of a one-time \$1 billion bonus.

-We booked four weeks and worked Monday to Friday straight. The closer to deadline the more intense it became, with 12 to 16-hour days, although we never went through the night in this round. We did go up to midnight once, and we worked through the last weekend," Hilland said cheerfully. In spite of the long hours and intensity, he would gladly do it again.

-The group we had on our side of the table was a good group to work with. We had some fun. We worked together well. We got to know each other better. That was a nice thing to get out of it," he said. -Also, I know the collective agreement a whole lot better now," Hilland added.

-Bargaining is a bit of an emotional roller-coaster depending on the response from the other side," he continued. The mood at the negotiating table ranged from constructive to tense, but never got downright ugly.

-The employer in this round was motivated to get an agreement. That helped us. The committee we faced across the table was actually willing to listen to what our issues were. So we had some really good dialogue," he said. -There were moments when we could have some joking back and forth and lighten the mood a bit. And other moments that were serious and down to the crunch. It wasn't a real us-against-them all the time, but more of a lets work together to get something that works for both of us."

At press time, the agreement he had helped forge was awaiting ratification from HSA members around the province. He was confident it would go through. -It's a good deal," he said.

Now that the bargaining marathon is over for health science professionals, Hilland can resume other HSA work. He is stepping down from the HSA Board of Directors in order to become, again, chief steward at his site. He has no other specific union-related plans ... but he knows he won't step back from activism: the need is too great and the rewards too high.

-Most of the time we struggle against injustice and don't make much progress, but once in a while we get a good win, and the members really appreciate it, and that makes it really worthwhile," Hilland said.

One of the highlights of Hilland's many years with HSA has been his involvement with the Committee for Equality and Social Action (formerly the Solidarity Committee). He was the first chair of this committee when it was formed in 1989.

-After we formed the committee we ended up realizing that by doing international solidarity we were gaining as well. We are in a globalized world right now and the pressures that affect us are the same ones that affect people in the South, particularly right now with free trade agreements and related matters. There are pressures that you can't fight just within your own borders; you have to fight in a global way," Hilland said.

-We set up the Solidarity Fund because we were always getting donation requests and spending time deciding which charity got what. We thought it would be better to have larger donations and actually be able to see the results. Out of that came the idea of funding specific projects. We partnered with community organizations ... and specifically women's organizations ... in Central America," he said.

-Most of the projects involve training a group of people who can train other people, so we've built a capacity in the sense of knowledge and ability to teach others. Some of the projects are working at changing legislation. It's about being active citizens."

Ultimately, he says, it's about people knowing what their rights are, and how to fight for them ... the very thing Hilland has known how to do, right from the beginning. He still values every opportunity HSA gives him to defend those rights, and to empower others to do the same. 

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