

BULLETIN

STRONG. MODERN. CARING.

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WITH A TOUGH ROUND OF BARGAINING ONLY JUST BEGUN, and in the face of short-sighted provincial cuts, delegates gathered at the Hotel Vancouver to grapple with the issues underlying this year's theme: a strong union, its members an essential part of the changing and modern health care system, standing up for the patients they care for every day.

PLENARY - THURSDAY, APRIL 15

Following a welcome by HSA President Reid Johnson, the plenary session kicked off early Friday afternoon with two discussion papers.

The first, presented by HSAs Dennis Blatchford in response to a resolution passed by delegates to the 2009 convention, examined the feasibility of providing addictions treatment for members and surveyed the addiction treatment resources other health care unions provide. The paper looked at five different programs: four in the health industry and one in the construction industry.

As supported by the Board of Directors, the paper recommended that HSA not undertake an addiction treatment program for HSA members based on the Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation model at the BC Nurses Union. Rather, it recommended learning from the BCNU experience and continuing HSAs work in improving initiatives like the EIP (Early Intervention Program) and PEARS (Prevention Early Active Return to Work Safely) so members get in the appropriate treatment queues in a timely manner; continuing to pursue alternate sick leave provisions like STIIP (Short Term Illness and Injury Plans) that are proven better at identifying and subsequently treating underlying health conditions caused by drug and alcohol addictions, and creating more awareness about drug and alcohol addictions in the workplace.

The second discussion paper, presented by HSAs Julio Trujillo, examined the need to update the seniority system to keep pace with amalgamations and other changes in the delivery of BCs health care and social services. The paper surveyed the history of challenges and updates to the seniority system, and reported that in the current round of bargaining, HSA will be making several proposals designed to enhance members job security and mobility.

The business then turned to the progress of bargaining, with reports from senior HSA staff. Jessica Bowering reported on the Nurses Bargaining Association, which was included in the two-year extension deal made with the government last year. Josef Reider addressed the Community Social Services Bargaining Association, which at press time is still stalled. Dani Demetlika spoke on the Community Health and Support Bargaining Association, where HSA members largely voted against a tentative agreement that was accepted by the majority of bargaining association members. On behalf of the bargaining committee, Bargaining Committee Chair Val Avery addressed progress at the Health Science Professionals Bargaining Association which represents the largest portion of HSAs membership.

Maureen Headley, HSAs chief negotiator and executive director for labour relations and legal services, then spoke about context, principles and objectives for the HSPBA negotiations.

Recent public opinion research shows that the public is growing more aware of health science professionals as an essential part of a changing health care system, explained Headley. Furthermore, the public trusts these professionals almost as much as they trust the other members of the modern health care team: doctors and nurses. This growing visibility and trust will serve us well at the bargaining table, and we aim to build on these with media and advertising campaigns, she said.

Negotiations are guided by key principles discussed at November's bargaining proposal conference: delivering quality health care, achieving fair wage increases, modernizing the classification system, addressing recruitment and retention problems, enhancing the quality of work life, improving benefits, developing a seamless and integrated sick leave and disability management scheme, developing job security and seniority initiatives and improving administration of the collective agreement.

"Our members told us to go and get the best deal possible, and that's what we're going to do," said Headley. "We're going to be vocal on the issues that matter to the public. We're going to be thoughtful and deliberate throughout the process. And we're going to be consistent with our values about protecting and strengthening public health care." HSA President Reid Johnson started the day with a report touching on all aspects of the union's activity in the last year.

"As the HSA grows and our work becomes more complex, I wanted to give a more detailed report than has been the tradition," explained Johnson as he surveyed a review of the HSA's strategic plan, progress at the bargaining tables, labour relations, occupational health and safety, defending public health by helping fund the BC Health Coalitions legal work on private clinics, participation in Run for the Cure, media relations, work with professional associations and support for activists.

Later in the morning, delegates heard from Ron Stipp, of the Canadian Labour Congress, who spoke about the campaign to improve retirement security for everyone in Canada by doubling the benefit of the Canada Pension Plan.

Stipp dismissed proposals for inferior defined contribution plans, noting that only one in four Canadians contributed to an RRSP in 2008.

"The CPP already covers 93 per cent of Canadians," said Stipp. "It's portable and covers you no matter where you work or where you live. It's the simplest and most effective way to reform pension benefits to make life better for ordinary people."

"Under our seven-year plan, CPP contributions would gradually increase by only two percent," added Stipp. "These increases would double average benefits."

Jim Sinclair, president of the BC Federation of Labour, took the podium in the afternoon to congratulate all health care workers for their dedication and to urge them to speak out on behalf of a public health care system under attack almost every day.

"We need you. We need you to speak out loud," he said. "Your union has been speaking out about this and you need to do more of that. We need you to talk about what's wrong and we need to talk about what's right because I want a better public system. Not a better private one only some folks can use."

One of the highlights of the afternoon was the announcement of this year's recipient of the David Bland Memorial Award. The award, named after an HSA member who was killed in the workplace five years ago, recognizes individual members who advocate for a safe work environment.

This year, the award was presented to Shannon Breeze, a registered psychiatric nurse at the Eric Martin Pavilion in Victoria. According to Workers Compensation Board data, the Eric Martin Pavilion is one of the most dangerous worksites in the province, and Shannon has been calling attention to the need for better measures to protect against violent incidents there.

"Shannon's positive attitude, tenacity and spirit... along with her tireless work to support and encourage all coworkers, even those represented by other unions ... has helped begin the process towards change at our workplace," said Johanna Lisakowski, a colleague whose words were read during the ceremony. "Whenever a

violent incident occurred, Shannon would give us the courage to fill out the incident reports, and then would follow up to make sure investigations were happening. Many times, we got negative reactions from managers, but Shannon would always keep in touch with the member, accompany them to all the necessary meetings, and advocate on their behalf, at times even coming under fire herself from bullying managers."

On Saturday morning, President Reid Johnson delivered an impassioned defence of public health care in the face of short-sighted and politically-motivated cuts by the provincial government.

-While British Columbians are clear about their support of a public health care system that provides equal access and excellent services to everyone, regardless of income," said Johnson. -And while British Columbians continue to worry about lengthening wait lists ... surgeries were cancelled, support services were eliminated and 10,000 MRI tests were cut out of the system."

-That's just nonsensical. The longer it takes to get a diagnosis, chances are you will be sicker and require more complex and expensive treatment and rehabilitation."

-But it wasn't just in diagnostics and other direct health services that health authorities cut," continued Johnson. -It was in services to the community. Services for some of the most vulnerable in our province: the mentally ill, those who suffer from substance abuse, the elderly, children."

-Cuts to children's services in a province that for five years running has had the highest child poverty rate in the country. That's not coincidence. That's deliberate public policy, and it's the policy that's shaping our future."

Describing the HSAs court battle against the private clinic attack on Medicare, Johnson called on delegates and members to speak out about the services we deliver ... services that are getting harder to access.

-There's nobody better than you to tell the stories," said Johnson. -You are the people who deliver the services day in and day out. And you need to tell that story."

Rachel Notley was the final guest speaker. A former HSA staff member and now NDP MLA for Edmonton Strathcona in Alberta, she spoke about the dramatic health care cuts in that province and about the importance of health professionals as part of the modern health care team.

-Health care has historically been attached to the doctor's office," she said. -Or to the hospital. But we all know good health care involves more. It involves promotion, prevention and attention to the social determinates of health. These are the services that are so often overlooked, and it is done at the peril of the whole health care system." 

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