



Health workers union rejects contract offer

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VANCOUVER -- In a reaction perhaps unique in labour annals, negotiators for the Health Sciences Association are so outraged by the provincial government's last contract offer that they have called off their latest round of job action.

The unusual strategy was prompted by a proposal that the union charged was riddled with concessions, classification rollbacks and a wage hike too meagre to keep up with the cost of living.

"This proposal is so far out of the box of what our members mandated us to negotiate, that we have to go back and consult with them," said **Reid Johnson**, president of the HSA, which represents the vast majority of the 17,000 health science professionals involved. "There's nothing in it."

The tone of Mr. Johnson's remarks - he said Monday he was so angry he could "crush a rose" - is a marked contrast to the relatively peaceful negotiations that have put most other public-sector contracts to bed this fall.

Union members include laboratory staff, pharmacists, health inspectors and specialists who perform, read and diagnose medical imaging.

Rotating strike action last week caused an estimated 3,000 procedures to be cancelled, according to the government. More union withdrawals had been scheduled to begin on Sunday. Rather than increase the heat, however, HSA bargainers opted to turn it down, at least for the time being. "We need our members to see this [proposal] and get their feedback," Mr. Johnson said.

He accused the government of trying to stampede the union out on a full strike, in order to legislate an end to the surprisingly bitter dispute. "They wanted to provoke us, and we didn't bite."

The two sides are locked in a disagreement over which settlement pattern should apply to the HSA: the 3-per-cent wage increase over two years accepted by nurses and other health-care workers, or the 4-per-cent hike won by members of the broader public sector, such as the B.C. Government and Service Employees Union.

The HSA argues that their members' wages are well behind counterparts in other provinces, leading to staff shortages, and they have not had a pay hike since April, 2009. In addition, Mr. Johnson said the government is demanding significant benefit rollbacks and classification changes that would actually reduce some members' wages.

"We want 4 per cent and an end to these concessions," the union leader declared. "It's not a one-size-fits-all world," he added, noting that the HSA is the only health-care union refusing to accept less than the BCGEU.

Health Minister Margaret MacDiarmid acknowledged that B.C. wages for health science professionals lag behind some other provinces. But she pointed out that those provinces have deficit problems.

"We are not going to have those kind of deficits," Ms. MacDiarmid vowed. "I do recognize these are very modest increases.... But the only way we could get the revenue for substantial raises would be to significantly increase taxes."

The minister said she also recognizes there are shortages within some professions represented by the HSA, and promised to work with the union to try to resolve them, once its contract is settled.

Mediator Vince Ready remains involved with the parties.

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