



HEU community health workers identify bargaining priorities

Hospital Employees' Union members working in community health across B.C. gathered at the HEU's Provincial Office on October 14 and 15 at the first bargaining conference focused solely on this sector.

During the two days, the 25 participants – a group that included mental health and community support workers, care aides and LPNs, and administration and payroll staff – reviewed bargaining demands submitted by locals, established bargaining priorities, planned outreach strategies and prepared for 2010 negotiations.

The priorities are maintaining and improving health and welfare benefits, obtaining direct-pay cards for prescription drugs, addressing scheduling issues, and attaining special adjustments for LPNs, employment counsellors and other difficult-to-recruit and retain jobs as their top priorities.

And due to the cuts that have already taken place in community health, job security loomed large. But members' hearts were always with those they support and care for, and that became the overarching theme of the conference. Whenever participants talked about cuts and their jobs, they spoke about the needs of clients and their families first.

HEU secretary-business manager Judy Darcy opened the conference by welcoming members and recognizing the mix of veteran and new union activists in attendance. She quickly moved into the reasons for coming together at this time.

As community health workers head into bargaining a renewed collective agreement, Darcy said that "it is critical to honestly state and assess the challenges we face and the strengths we have.

"In every health authority, they are going over their budget line by line, looking for places to cut spending," she said. "But community health is about prevention. You support and serve people so that they don't end up in acute and long-term care. You are the solution."

After Darcy's address, members broke into groups to explore the value of their work, ending that session with illustrated presentations of their jobs and the people they serve. In the afternoon, they brought forward and discussed bargaining demands. In the morning of day two, they had solidified the demands into priorities.

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Seth Klein from the Canadian Centre of Policy Alternatives gave a presentation on poverty reduction, tying workers' wages, benefits and working conditions to broader issues in our society, particularly the treatment of marginalized groups like those with mental illness or addictions, seniors living alone and people with disabilities.

And participants elected their bargaining committee representatives, Graham O'Neill from the North Shore local and Carol Ryan-Hunter from the Kamloops Thompson local, who along with HEU servicing representative Joey Hartman will join their sisters and brothers from the other unions in the sector at the Community Bargaining Association.

The Community Bargaining Association's lead union is the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union. BCGEU president Darryl Walker attended the conference on the second day and brought strong greetings of solidarity and unity to HEU. In summarizing his impressions of the event, he said, "This is how we build solidarity. Bottom line, it's about working together."

Members ended their conference by exploring ways to mobilize their locals and engage their community allies as they head into bargaining. HEU president Ken Robinson acknowledged the work done over the two days in his end-of-day remarks, telling participants that "we recognize that you're at the eye of the storm.

"The good news is that you know your work matters and your clients know your work matters," said Robinson.

HEU financial secretary Donisa Bernardo also applauded the members and the success of their conference before she wished them safe travel home. "The work you do every day is impressive. It's clear that you bring a lot of heart and passion to your jobs – and that your top priority is always your clients."

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