



Bargaining Bulletin

HOSPITAL EMPLOYEES' UNION

THE HEART OF HEALTH CARE

Health employers' opening position falls short

*Difficult negotiations lie ahead as unions
prepare counterproposals*

ON WEDNESDAY, health employers tabled an opening position which responded to some critical issues raised by health unions over the last two weeks, but fell short on wages, job security and workload concerns.

HEU and its union partners in the Facilities Bargaining Association are preparing a counterproposal, but chief bargaining spokesperson Judy Darcy says everyone should be prepared for some tough bargaining in the days ahead.

"Even within the government's restrictive negotiating framework, health employers have sold our members short," says Darcy.

"They have proposed general wage increases that would see our members' current wages fall behind inflation, much less make up for government-imposed wage cuts.

"And their response to the recruitment and retention issues simply will not stem the tide of skilled workers leaving health care.

The Health Employers Association of BC is proposing a four-year contract containing annual wage increases of 1.5 per cent.

And a proposed early signing bonus of \$3,700 -- that can be pro-rated for casual or part-time workers -- is only available if the contract is ratified by March 31, according to the government.

The bonus would be a one-time payment that won't increase hourly rates or make up for wages lost over the last two years.

HEABC also said it was prepared to offer trades workers, power engineers and IT workers increases of about \$4.50 an hour - phased in over a four year agreement - with a reduced starting wage for new trades workers starting in 2009.

"They simply don't have four years to find solutions to a crisis that's putting expensive hospital infrastructure and systems at risk today," says Darcy.

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Hospital Employees' Union - 5000 North Fraser Way, Burnaby, B.C. V5J 5M3 - (604) 438-5000

The BC Health Services Division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees



“And implementing a lower tier of wages for new trades workers a year before the Olympics - especially given our aging trades workforce - makes absolutely no sense.”

They’ve also proposed an additional one per cent increase over the general wage increase for some occupations including LPNs, nursing unit assistants, buyers and buyer supervisors, pharmacy techs and lab assistants - with additional special bonuses for some.

“It’s a step in the right direction and a tribute to the powerful presentations our members made at the bargaining table about their increased training and responsibilities,” says Darcy.

“But despite all the evidence, health employers still don’t understand the scope of their recruitment and retention challenges.”

Health employers also said health care workers would be eligible for a share of a post-Olympic dividend fund the size of which depends on the size of the provincial surplus in 2010.

Job security remains a major issue, with health employers proposing to change the current “five-year” rule on bumping options to seven years.

The unions are looking to improve on bumping provisions and negotiate other improvements to job security.

“The threat of privatization and contracting out looms large in the daily working lives of our

members so we must deal with job security in a meaningful way,” says Darcy.

On workload, health employers countered the unions’ proposal for a mechanism to address workload issues - and grieve them if necessary - with a proposal for regional committees with no enforcement powers.

“We owe it to our patients and clients - and to our injured, stressed and overtaxed members - to negotiate effective measures that address crushing levels of workload,” says Darcy.

And although they did not table specific concession demands on benefits, health employers have signaled that cutting costs in this area is on their bargaining agenda.

“We will resist concessions in this area,” says Darcy. “But we will encourage health employers to work with us to address the causes of illness and disability in the workplace.”

Health employers also provided some promising responses to other union proposals like professional responsibility language for LPNs, a jointly-administered paid education leave fund, and improvements to various premiums and allowances.

HEU and its union bargaining partners will take the next couple of days to study HEABC’s opening position and compile a comprehensive counterproposal.

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