

# Health contract impasse: why they can't agree

## Unions: SAHO won't bargain fairly

**BY GORDON CAMPBELL, BARBARA CAPE & BONNIE ERICKSON, SPECIAL TO THE LEADER-POST - JULY 22, 2010**

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Service Employees International Union (SEIU-West) and the Saskatchewan Government Employees Union (SGEU) are deeply frustrated with the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations' (SAHO) approach to this current round of contract talks. Never have we experienced such a continued refusal by SAHO to negotiate fairly and fully. Never have we witnessed such a public campaign to strong-arm our membership to accept a SAHO offer.

As the unions representing 25,000 health-care workers, we have made a very reasonable proposal for settlement of our contracts with SAHO. Our offer would cost the government less than 13% over a four year term compared to the 37% settlement with the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses (SUN). We have agreed to SAHO's proposed general wage increase of 9.5%. In view of the recent economic downturn, we have proposed that needed improvements to premiums and professional fees be implemented late in our contracts to reduce overall costs. We have offered compromises to SAHO's demands for concessions, even though we see no reason why we should accept rollbacks to our members' rights that were not demanded of SUN or of other public sector unions. We have indicated that we are ready to bargain to reach a tentative agreement that we can recommend to our membership.

We estimate that nearly \$2 million in public funds has been spent on the SAHO advertising campaign to sell a bad deal to our members. In addition to SAHO's public advertisements, health-care workers are inundated with SAHO propaganda which is mailed to their homes, displayed at work and even posted inside the bathroom stalls in employee washrooms.

Despite our efforts, we cannot get a straight answer as to the amount spent on SAHO's campaign because the Ministry of Health denies it has any idea how SAHO spends the block funding it provides to SAHO, and SAHO, because of its non-profit status, is exempt from freedom of information legislation.

Health-care workers do not want SAHO's offer because it is tied to major concessions to their rights. These concessions, if implemented, would undermine the quality of health-care services and worsen staff shortages in a growing number of health-care classifications. Health-care workers rejected these concessions in 2009 when they voted in favour of job action and rejected them again in 2010 at hundreds of membership meetings.

SAHO's offer also includes a mean-spirited proposal to cut off the accrual of health-care workers' retroactive pay. Such strong-arm tactics are in part responsible for the current stalemate. As time passes, SAHO's position on retroactive pay makes its final offer increasingly less attractive. Why would anyone care to vote for an offer that robs them of retroactive wages?

SAHO's offer does not address the unequal treatment of our members compared to RNs. For example, prior to the government's recent deal with SUN, our members who work side-by-side with RNs received the same premiums as RNs for working evenings and weekend shifts. Now we are expected to accept less. Why are SAHO and the government playing favourites?

SAHO has mishandled its responsibilities as the representative of health employers and government in these contract negotiations. Its arrogance in this round of talks demonstrates how the Wall government's changes to labour legislation have hurt workers. Incredibly, Saskatchewan is the only jurisdiction in Canada that denies essential services workers the right to strike, but offers no other options for settling a dispute if the parties reach an impasse.

CUPE, SEIU-West and SGEU want to bargain. We hope SAHO, when we finally meet again on July 23, is prepared to do the same.

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