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Shelve the legislation and conclude an agreement

Second attempt at essential services plans “utter failure,” CUPE says

Prairie North: The CUPE Health Care Council, which bargains on behalf of 12,600 health care providers in Prairie North and four other health regions, says the employers’ second attempt at developing essential services plans is “an utter failure.”

The CUPE Health Care Council, which received the revised plans from the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO) on February 25, says the employers new essential services lists are inaccurate, incomplete and do not comply with the Public Service Essential Services Act.

The employers were told to be reasonable following the release of their first essential services plans – which deemed virtually everyone as essential – but the revised plans also fail to meet the “common sense test,” says Sharon Del Frari, a special care aide in Cut Knife and secretary of CUPE Local 5111.

“In Prairie North, 94% of our members have been deemed essential under the revised plan, which means only 101 of our 1,670 members would be able to walk the picket line,” she says. “By declaring virtually everyone essential, there is no pressure on the employer to negotiate a fair agreement – and no pressure means no progress in contract negotiations.”

Other problems with the health region’s essential services plan include:

- Prairie North has deemed so many people essential there will be more CUPE health care providers working during a strike than during a regular work day. For example, at the Saskatchewan Hospital, the employer has deemed the equivalent of 56 full-time special care aides as essential. There are currently 46 special care aides working at the hospital.

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- In many facilities, CUPE health care providers routinely work short-staffed. Health regions have refused to address the problem – until now. Under some of the essential services plans, employers not only have more people working – but they’ve added additional shifts. In Cut Knife, for example, housekeeping staff work six days a week; the essential services plan will have them working seven days a week.
- In the Battlefords Union Hospital, the essential services plan calls for a reduction of just one housekeeping staff member for each of the two daily shifts; housekeepers routinely work shorter staffed than that.

In addition to these problems, four of the five essential services plans failed to identify the services they deemed essential – a requirement of the act. They’ve also changed the hours of work of some CUPE health care providers and deemed others as “on call” with no hours of work and no right to strike.

The CUPE Health Council has written to the five health regions identifying areas where their plans are in violation of the act and must be redone.

“The government’s new essential services legislation is consuming a tremendous amount of time and appears to be totally unworkable,” says Brian Manegre, President of CUPE Local 5111. Although CUPE has been at the negotiating table since last September, little progress has been made towards a new agreement.

Manegre says the government and SAHO should shelve the legislation – as they did for members of the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses – and focus on concluding a fair agreement with CUPE’s 12,600 health care providers, including the more than 1,600 members in Prairie North.

- 30 -

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