

Negotiations slated to run until March 17

Provincial negotiations with the assistance of Andrew Sims and a mediation panel are set to continue well into March. Dates for talks have been set right up to St. Patrick's Day, March 17.

"As long as there is a possibility of a negotiated agreement, we'll keep talking," UNA President Heather Smith said. "A negotiated agreement that UNA members vote on is the priority."

Andrew Sims has asked the parties not to negotiate through the media and news coverage has dropped off sharply as UNA and the Health Regions are not releasing any details about the talks, or comments on the prospects that the talks will succeed.

A Channel strikers reach a deal

Reports are coming in at press time that A Channel has reached a tentative agreement with its striking workers. The deal was reached after three days of recent talks.

The 76 employees have been on strike looking for a first contract since Sept. 18. UNA members have been strong strike supporters and have helped out on the picket line. The union, Local #1900 of the Communications, Energy and Paperworks, CEP, is recommending its members accept the deal. No details on the settlement were available.

CBS employees reach deal after 122 day strike

Some 44 workers at Canadian Blood Services in Nova Scotia are going back to work with a new contract after a long 122 days on the picket line. Blood collection centres in Halifax and Sydney were virtually closed down by the dispute as most donors honoured the picket line of the Service employees.

The strikers were seeking wage parity with other blood service workers in other centres. The final settlement included a 60¢ an hour adjustment and a 6.5% increase over the three years of the agreement.

Martin's first Speech from the Throne short on concrete health policy

The government of new Prime Minister Paul Martin fell far short of the mark on health policy in its recent Throne Speech according to opposition members.

There isn't "any serious response to the landmark recommendations of the commission which was so ably chaired by Roy Romanow and which reported well over a year ago to the government, based on consultations across Canada, with a series of very specific and concrete recommendations to strengthen and improve the health care system in Canada," said New Democrat MP Svend Robinson.

Noting that there was not a single word about Romanow, Robinson said that, "This is the same government, the same Prime Minister, that just found almost \$4.5 billion for corporate tax cuts, tax cuts not to small businesses but cuts in taxes to some of the biggest and most profitable corporations in the country. If he can find that kind of money, billions of dollars, for corporate tax cuts surely to goodness he can find money to meet the recommendations of the Roy Romanow commission with respect to funding for health care."

Case on possible bias at the LRB dismissed

Court of Queens Bench Justice Jack Watson dismissed charges from UNA and CEP that the Labour Relations Board could have been biased in its Bill 27 decisions. The decision came January 28 after nearly four days of hearings on the application. Judge Watson ruled that there was not enough evidence to show that a "reasonable person would have an apprehension of bias" at the LRB.

UNA and the Communications Energy and Paperworkers Union (CEP) took the case to court after a Freedom of Information and Privacy (FOIP) request showed the provincial government and the LRB had communicated extensively about Bill 27. Because the government, and its Health Regions, are often at the LRB as Employers asking for rulings on labour questions, the unions said it was inappropriate for the government to possibly be influencing the Board and its decisions on Bill 27 questions.

"We are very concerned that the LRB not be unduly influenced by government – particularly in matters like Bill 27 where the government is effectively the Employer," UNA's Director of Labour Relations David Harrigan told news media.

HSAA arbitration released

Professional and technical health workers get salary increases in arbitration

Alberta's professional, technical and other health workers are getting salary increases of 5.5% in year one, 5.5% in year two and 3% or cost of living in the third year in a new contract that was set by an arbitration award on February 4.

Health Sciences Association of Alberta (HSAA) members have been impatiently awaiting the arbitration award since hearings concluded last summer. Their contract had expired March 31, 2002 and they expected this would be a salary catch-up agreement that would keep pace with UNA's 2001 contract.

The award from arbitrator Andrew Sims, who is now assisting with UNA negotiations, also added a 3.5% long service increment for professional employees with 13 years or more experience. HSAA estimates that about 40 per cent of its members will also get the 3.5%.

Pharmacists and some other specialists are getting further market adjustment increases that give them raises ranging from 22 to 28 percent.

"The arbitration panel recognizes that in order to retain and recruit professional and technical employees, they must be paid competitive wages," said HSAA president Elisabeth Ballermann.

HSAA had been seeking a 9th step on the pay grid and was disappointed with the award of a long-service increment that only kicks in for Employees who had been at the top eighth step for six years or more. In his dissenting opinion on the award HSAA's nominee to the panel, Bob Blair said that because this increment applies only to professional classifications and technical classifications of Grade 6 or higher it "introduces an element of unequal treatment."

UNA's Director of Labour Relations, David Harrigan, says that the HSAA arbitration award will have little if any impact on our negotiations. "The issues were simply about salary. Salary is about the only thing that has NOT been a major issue of dispute in our negotiations," he said.

Only salaries and related items were forwarded to arbitration, the other terms of the contract had been signed off earlier in negotiations. For many of the other terms, like special leave, education allowances and on call charges they had settled on parity with the UNA contract. Some of these, all equivalent to the UNA 2001 contract, included:

- Shift differential of \$1.75.
- Weekend premium of \$1.75.
- On-call rates to \$3.00/\$4.25.
- 2X the on-call rate for short notice change of the call schedule.
- 3 hour minimum at the overtime rate for call backs
- \$0.35/km rate for travel
- Reimbursement for business insurance up to \$260.
- Non-refundable vacation costs to be paid by employer when an approved vacation is cancelled.
- Dental fee guide to be based on current Blue Cross fee guide.
- Increase in maximums for extensive and orthodontic services to \$2,000 each.
- 80% direct payment of prescriptions. (UNA also has payment for "all" prescribed medications, although the employer contests this.)

Premier promises to spend bundle pre-election, but little mention of health

Ralph Klein promised Albertans a lot of spending of extra resource revenue in his provincial TV address on February 4. But the Premier's 20 year plan for the province was short on details in key areas.

"The bulk of the additional 500 million dollars will go to Alberta's top two priorities: education and health," Klein said, but he did not get into any specifics.

Many of Alberta's health authorities are already running sizable deficits from underfunding, including a \$62 million deficit for the Capital Health Region.

NDP leader Raj Pannu said Klein also ignored contentious issues, such as the price of electricity and car insurance, and that the \$85,000 spent on the speech was a waste of taxpayers' money.

Liberal MLA Kevin Taft called the speech "Empty propaganda, vague promises, vague timelines and very little to address the real concerns of ordinary Albertans."

Friends of Medicare said that Klein should be returning to his promise to eliminate health care premiums, particularly for seniors.

"Klein should also announce the necessary funds to build a new public hospital in South-East Calgary," FOM Coordinator Harvey Voogd told news media.

"Calgarians don't deserve to be guinea pigs for another high risk health care experiment such as P3s - public-private-partnerships. The SE hospital should be built the tried, true and tested way as a publicly funded, owned and operated hospital," he said.