

NURSING WEEK

Recognizing what nurses do for all our families

It's hard to picture exactly how important nursing is to Alberta's families. But consider that there are over 23,000 RNs and RPNs in UNA and each of them works with hundreds of clients, patients and residents each year. It's clear that nurses touch the lives of every family in the province.

In 1972, the International Council of Nurses designated May 12 as International Nurses Day. In 1985 the federal government established this as National Nursing Week in Canada.

Nurses, and sometimes Employers, hold many different types of events to recognize National Nursing Week. Some hold teas, professional development days or other types of events.

Send in reports of your celebrations

UNA Locals and members who take part in Nursing Week celebrations can send in short reports, and especially photos of their local events, to UNA for a special photo section in the next *NewsBulletin*.

LPNs in negotiations

Negotiations for the new Region-wide contracts for Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) began in April. Bargaining dates up to the end of August have been set for the talks.

The LPNs are represented by AUPE (Alberta Union of Provincial Employees), and PHAA (Provincial Health Authorities of Alberta) is bargaining for eight of the nine health regions as well as ten voluntary organizations. The Calgary Health Region is negotiating separately with AUPE.

The Auxiliary Nursing negotiations also must adapt contracts to the Region-wide bargaining units created by the provincial government's Bill 27 law.

AFL Forum talks about fighting back

Quite a number of UNA members participated in the Alberta Federation of Labour Membership Forum in Calgary on May 7th and 8th. They heard some powerful messages from guest speakers on the theme of the wide-ranging attack on public services and public service workers.

The essential lesson was that workers need to pull together to turn back this massive offensive, UNA President Heather Smith said after the Forum.

The campaign against good, public unionized jobs is taking place worldwide, several speakers said.

"The health care strike in BC was about exactly this type of thing." - Heather Smith

Jorge Anaya, a member of the teachers' union in Columbia, told the forum that in his country public jobs, like those in education have been destabilized by a wide-ranging offensive. It starts with discrediting public services and the people who provide them. Jorge said the unionized people in education and health care are characterized as being "privileged" because they have jobs with decent salaries and benefits. Then "restructuring" and "reform" begin as jobs are contracted out to the private sector. Real jobs turn into contracts with no benefits or security, he says.

"It sounds a lot like what's beginning here," says Heather Smith. "The health care strike in BC was about exactly this type of thing."

Federal election coming?

Voting on the future for Medicare

June 28 is the likely day for the federal election, which is widely rumored to be called any day. With all the parties putting public health care front and centre, debate on the future of Medicare should be a big part of the campaign.

The fate of Canada's public health system lies in the hands of the next federal government. That makes some politicians in Alberta nervous.

"Paul Martin has a philosophical affinity with Alberta Tories," Alberta New Democrat Leader Raj Pannu told a recent meeting on healthcare. With Health Minister Pierre Pettigrew saying for-profit health care is just fine one day and retracting the statement the next day, Pannu says the Liberals have essentially the same approach as Premier Klein.

"We need a minority government to implement Romanow," Pannu says. He pointed out that Ottawa brought in Medicare under pressure from the NDP during the minority Liberal government of the early 60's.

Alberta Liberal Leader Kevin Taft also says the federal election will be crucial to how Klein proceeds with his much talked about "reform" in Alberta. Taft says Klein is deliberately waiting until after the federal election, perhaps at the request of Conservative leader Stephen Harper, before announcing the new health care "reforms".

Nurses in the federal election

"We became nurses to make a difference," says Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) President Linda Silas. "In the coming federal election, we need to speak up for our patients and the public, not-for-profit health care system on which they depend."

The Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) is preparing a campaign to give nurses information on health care issues in the election. UNA will be distributing the election information to members.

Part of the campaign focuses on funding. Currently, the federal government covers 18 percent of provincial health care costs, which includes all of the money agreed to in the September 2000 Federal-Provincial Accord, as well as more recent promises. National Health Commissioner Roy Romanow called on the federal government to increase its health care spending to cover 25 percent. Historically the federal government paid 25 to 50% of Medicare costs.

But because some provinces (most notably Alberta) are turning more and more health care into a for-profit business, the CFNU says any funds transferred from the feds to the provinces need to come with strings attached.

Watch for more election information from UNA and CFNU, or check the CFNU website: www.nursesunions.ca.

BC's illegal health strike

After eight days, the illegal strike by 43,000 health workers in British Columbia ended with a saw-off agreement that saved thousands of health workers jobs, but also included rollbacks, notably a 15% drop in wages. The strikers didn't get all they wanted but they did succeed in forcing the government to back down on its law to impose a contract with even worse terms, including making the wage cut retroactive. Premier Gordon Campbell's government actually passed the law to make health workers pay back some of their wages.

On Saturday, May 1, the internationally celebrated workers' day, it looked as though the health workers were going to be joined in support by the strike by teachers, power company employees, bus drivers, municipal workers and thousands of others. The entire labour movement was ready to defy the government. Spreading strikes in support would have completely brought the province to a halt.

"We reached this point because the government has repeatedly used legislation to tear up freely negotiated contracts, and taken away the livelihood of thousands of women and men who work in our health care system," BC Federation of Labour President Jim Sinclair said.

But the Health Employees Union and other unions reached an agreement with the government late on May 2nd. The deal was certainly a compromise, but it made the government back off its legislation in some key ways:

- No retroactive pay cut
- An enhanced severance package, with additional funding of \$25 million
- Future contracting out will be capped at 400 in the first year and 200 in the second. Gives workers a measure of security and dramatically curtails the privatization of health care.

"This deal saved thousands of jobs," said Sinclair. "We also got the employer to limit its plans to privatize public health care services. That's a major victory for public health care and union members because the government had very clearly stated they'd never do that."

The already unpopular Liberal government came off looking mean-spirited with the legislation and then it backed down.

As the *Globe and Mail* editorialized: "His [Gordon Campbell's] government is being blamed for unnecessarily disrupting the health system and for thrusting the province back into a deeply polarized political atmosphere... bashing unions, imposing contracts and refusing to negotiate are not healthy ways to achieve their goals."