

June 4, 2008

SUN Ponders Pay Hike

Does a 35 percent wage hike over four years sound like a good offer? Not necessarily, says Rosalie Longmore, head of the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses. Nevertheless, SUN members will vote on June 23rd on the "final offer" from the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO). Given the generous offer, nurses ought to vote yes.

Since most nurses are in the top pay bracket (or step), the pay increase is indeed sweet. This group would see their wages immediately rise from \$64,232 to \$70,655 and reach \$86,624 in April 2011. The new contract offer also pays one-time bonuses of \$1,750 in 2011 and 2012, and ensures overtime always pays double. Moreover, all nurses who have been in SUN for at least 20 years would get two percent more, hiking pay at the top step to \$88,359. Nurse practitioners have been offered the same wage hikes, plus an additional \$6 per hour.

Heading into negotiations, SUN had asked for wage parity with Alberta nurses. Incredibly, SAHO's first offer gave them just that. Nurses in Alberta (and Manitoba, incidentally) recently agreed to a ten percent wage increase over two years. SUN nurses were offered ten percent in the first year, and another five in the second. Incredibly, SUN initially spurned these terms because

Alberta nurses might end up with more money after a new contract in 2010.

Public outcry over the significant wage hikes led the union to change their tactics. In their May 30 press release, SUN acknowledged the generous pay hike, but instead expressed disappointment about risks to patient safety and staffing levels.

However, SAHO's offer explicitly binds health regions to abide by all the terms of SUN's recruitment and retention agreement with the province. SAHO will hire as many RNs as existed on November 1, 2007, including the vacancies at that time. They will even sit down with SUN in December to work out ways to entice nurses eligible for retirement to stay in the workforce.

The only caveat is that if an SUN position is posted and not filled (because no one wants it), SAHO reserves the right to hire an LPN or other health worker to fill the post on a six month temporary basis. This temp position could only be renewed if, again, no SUN nurse wanted it. Otherwise, it would return to an interested SUN employee. Is this really too much to ask, especially if staffing levels and patient safety are such a priority for SUN?

It's no wonder this is SAHO's final

offer. Apart from handing control over health regions to SUN nurses along with a blank cheque, it's hard to see how SAHO could go any further. With three other health care unions without a contract, the \$600-million offer for 7,700 SUN employees has already become the rabbit to chase.

Moreover, if the registered nurses of SUN feel overworked and underpaid, licensed practical nurses are more than ready to pick up the slack. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, who represents LPNs, recently complained that only half of the province's 2,200 LPNs are allowed to use all the skills they're trained for. The rest function as glorified special care aids.

It's tough to have sympathy for SUN in their negotiations. Few taxpayers will see their own wages grow by this pace over the next four years. Further, health costs have risen four times faster than inflation in the past ten years, and have also outpaced our economic growth. This year, health will take a record 43.7 percent of the provincial budget.

If this is "not about the money," as Longmore insists, maybe it's about the power. Regardless, neither taxpayers nor health regions can afford to hand SUN any more keys or any more dollars.

-Lee Harding, Sask. Director