

Labour relations update: Mediation ends Nov. 18, 2014

A 45-day mediation process to help identify the future labour relations structure for unionized employees within our new provincial health authority has ended. All outstanding issues could not be resolved and is now going to arbitration hearings Dec.9-14 and must be finished by Jan. 1, 2015. The outcome of arbitration is binding and final. This process is part of the new Health Authorities Act.

Currently there are about 21,000 unionized health care providers represented by four healthcare unions (CUPE, NSGEU, NSNU, UNIFOR) across the nine districts and the IWK, with 50 separate bargaining units. The Health Authorities Act allows for the consolidation of nine regional health authorities into one by April 1, 2015. The law also includes a mechanism to identify which unions will represent specific employee classifications. Once the new provincial health care organization is created, its employees will be in one of four bargaining units: nursing, health care, clerical or support services. Each of the four unions (CUPE, NSGEU, NSNU, UNIFOR) will represent one of those bargaining units.

The arbitrator is expected to make a recommendation to government Jan. 1, 2015 about which union will represent which bargaining unit.

Labour Relations Update: Questions & Answers

What is going to change in relation to my current benefits, pension and retirement allowance?

There will be no change. Wages, benefits, pensions and retirement allowances will not change as a result of the new Health Authorities Act. These are already standard across the health care system. The employers and unions have been working to come up with an approach to make sure that these benefits are preserved as we move forward and begin operating under one employer-a new provincial health authority. The goal is to make sure terms and conditions of employment and related premiums are fair and consistent for health care workers across the province.

What about my seniority? Seniority and service are protected. The arbitration process will help determine how seniority will be handled.

What about people with accrued vacation and sick time? Will that be preserved if they move to a different union?

Wages, benefits and pensions will not change or be lost. These individual benefits are already standard across the health care system. Vacation and sick time are considered benefits, and employees will still maintain those accrued benefits.

Will I have to reapply for my frontline position? No. Most front-line employees will see no change in their role/job when the transition takes place on April 1, 2015.

Which union will represent me? That has not been decided. It will be dealt with as part of the arbitration process. The legislation identifies bargaining units for unionized employees, which are: Nursing, Health Care, Clerical, Support.

When will we know which union represents which groups of employees? Arbitration will help determine union representation. The deadline for completing that process is Jan. 1, 2015.

What is the difference between mediation and arbitration? In mediation, a mediator works with all parties – union and employer – to find mutually acceptable solutions to outstanding issues. In the arbitration phase, the unresolved issues are decided solely by the arbitrator based on information supplied by the interested parties. Arbitration is binding and final.

What does all of this mean for our current contracts and negotiations that were planned?

The Health Authorities Act freezes contract negotiations and prohibits strikes or lockouts until April 1, 2015. Any essential services negotiations that are planned, or were already underway, stopped.

What happens after April 1? Will the new employer and government look to take away our current wages and benefits and make pension changes?

After April 1, the unions will begin to bargain, in order to reach new collective agreements for their members. While it's impossible to predict the outcome of those negotiations, they will be based on workers' current wages, pensions and benefits.

How much longer will I be represented by my current union?

The new labour relations structure to be identified through the upcoming Arbitration will be effective April 1, 2015. Until then, you will continue to pay dues to your current union, and it will continue to represent you. Please keep in mind that some members may not change unions at all, depending on the Arbitration decision.

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