

MAHCP STILL WAITING



For Central Table Bargaining To Begin

By Bob Moroz, MAHCP President



MAHCP members have been asking where we are with bargaining for central table contracts (NRHA, WRHA and Shared Health). I certainly understand why – it's been three years since the majority of contracts expired, and in some cases even longer. There are many reasons for that delay, none of them good. After years of employer excuses and outright government interference, MAHCP members are rightfully fed up and tired of waiting. I am, too.

The nurses and support sector (CUPE) started bargaining late last year. They've been without contracts for even longer than MAHCP, so we expected them to get to the bargaining table before us. We don't know the current status of those negotiations, but nothing indicates they will end anytime soon. Neither the employer nor the Manitoba Government has expressed any eagerness to expedite the bargaining process for any health care sector, and they haven't signaled any readiness to get to the table with us. At the end of the day the employer only has so many human resources to devote to the bargaining process, and they're stretched thin. It's no excuse, but it is the reality.

On MAHCP's side, our Central Table Bargaining Committee has been hard at work making sure we're ready as soon as we can get a date. We know it's going to be a slow process even once we begin. Allied Health (the Professional/Technical/Paramedical or PTP sector) is always the most complicated, and thanks to the recent bargaining unit restructuring it's far more complex than usual.

The Bargaining Committee has been looking at no fewer than 46 different collective agreements that currently cover our central table members. While there are some similarities between them, those 46 agreements were negotiated by five different unions and cover approximately 6,000 members in roughly 190 classifications working at over 130 different sites across the province. On top of that, we received an unprecedented number of bargaining proposals from members asking for new or updated language. To tackle this monumental task, the Bargaining Committee has already held a total of 19 all-day meetings to sift through, prioritize and develop the initial bargaining package. There is still some work left to do, but every member of our Committee is focused on the task.

WHAT'S UP WITH BILL 28?

With contributions by President Bob Moroz and Vice President Tanya Burnside

Although we, and other unions, successfully overturned the Manitoba Government's unconstitutional wage-freeze legislation (Bill 28, The Public Services Sustainability Act or PSSA) last year in the Manitoba Court of Queen's Bench, that battle is far from over.

Government is appealing that ruling, insisting they should be able to interfere with our constitutional right to free and fair collective bargaining. They aren't waiting for that appeal process to play out, they're doubling down and we're seeing the effects right now with Manitoba Hydro workers (IBEW 2034) who have voted to strike rather than accept a wage freeze.

(Cont. on pg. 2)

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Unfortunately we don't have many levers we can pull to force the employer to the table, but if the past is any guide we should follow the nurses and support in due course and begin bargaining soon. We will be ready, although we fully expect that the employer won't be and we anticipate what could be an even longer and more challenging process than we have experienced in the past.

I know our members are frustrated after three years of delays. I am, too, as is every member of the Bargaining Committee. We have been stretched, kicked, ignored and downsized. We have been through years of an austerity government that believes they can balance their books on our members' backs, and we've just endured a year of a brutal pandemic that's still going. We'll be reminding the employer of all these issues at the bargaining table.

I will keep you updated when there is more to say about bargaining. In the meantime, we must continue to hang together and be One Strong Voice for Allied Health. Please keep sending me your questions and concerns to bobm@mahcp.ca and I'll do my best to respond.

(Bill 28 cont. from pg. 1)

Mike Espenell from IBEW 2034 told CBC that "From the get-go, we haven't really asked for anything substantive. We haven't asked for anything above cost of living. What they've proposed is rollbacks over the whole duration of the contract."

That pretty much sums up this government's approach to bargaining across the board with public-sector unions lately, and there's not much sign of it changing.

Winnipeg School Division (WSD) bus drivers (UFCW Local 832) recently went on a three-month strike for similar reasons. "Bus drivers went on strike last fall to stand up against the PSSA [Bill 28], and we're incredibly proud of these members for standing up and fighting for what's right," said Bea Bruske, Secretary-Treasurer for UFCW Local 832. "Without the dark cloud of the PSSA hanging over bargaining... a strike would have easily been avoided." In short, we know it's tough out there for unions looking for a fair deal from this government.

That said, there are signs of hope. Arbitrators have rightfully ignored Bill 28 in recent decisions and have awarded wage increases to the WSD bus drivers and also to teachers in Pembina Trails and Louis Riel School Divisions. More recently, and even more significantly, the Beautiful Plains Teachers Association ratified an agreement last month that includes wage increases that go beyond the terms of Bill 28. That agreement was reached through negotiation with their Employer, showing that "Free and unrestricted collective bargaining works for both teachers and their employers" according to James Bedford, President of Manitoba Teachers' Society. Beautiful Plains is the first public-sector agreement to be reached since the Pallister Government introduced Bill 28 in 2017.

Despite these encouraging developments, we still face an uphill battle against a provincial government determined to save money wherever they can on the backs of health care professionals. MAHCP members are prepared for that fight.



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-Mike Espenell, IBEW 2034