

Union slams SAHO

Contract letter sent to workers 'bullying' tactic: health-care union

By Hannah Scissons of The StarPhoenix

A letter sent by the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations (SAHO) to health-care union members who have been without a contract for more than two years is being called "bullying" and "intimidating" by one union. But a SAHO spokesperson says the letter — which was sent to union members' homes, a first for SAHO — was simply

meant to be informative and educational.

"Since that letter went out, all of last week, all of this week, we have been receiving numerous phone calls and emails from members who are upset this went directly to their homes," said Barb Cape, president of the Service Employees International Union-West (SEIU), which represents health-care workers in the Saskatoon Health Region.

"They feel the purpose of the letter was not to share information but to harass, to intimidate."

The letter was signed by Susan Antosh, president of SAHO, which bargains contracts on behalf of health regions.

About 25,000 members of SEIU-West, the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union have been without contracts since March 31, 2008, and talks between the unions and SAHO broke off in January.

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SAHO: Letter 'crossed the line,' employee says

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The letter outlines how much money employees have been losing because SAHO's "final offer," tabled in January, cut off retroactive pay as of April 1.

"You are now working for 7.5 per cent less than you would have been receiving had the agreement been ratified by March 31, 2010," the letter says. It is accompanied by an information sheet telling employees that loss equates to about \$750 per person between April 1 and June 30. For some job classifications the amount is even more: \$2,520 for a combined lab X-ray tech, for example.

SAHO spokesperson Marj Gavigan said the intent of the letter was to provide information that SAHO was concerned wasn't being communicated to employees.

"The employers believe that they've made a fair and competitive offer and that the employees should have the opportunity to vote on it," she said.

But employees such as Celine Hounjet, a medical laboratory technologist at Royal University Hospital, say they already voted on a similar — arguably better — agreement and rejected it by giving their unions strike mandates.

She said "angry doesn't start to describe" how she felt when she received the letter from SAHO.

"It's fine if they want to do this in public, it's a public war in the media or whatever, but once you start sending it to my home, you've crossed the line," she said.

Cape said SEIU-West held more than 50 meetings in June with its membership and the overwhelming response to SAHO's final offer echoed Hounjet's: That they had already voted on a nearly identical offer and rejected it with the strike vote.

Cape said the government's essential services legislation, though, has tied the unions' hands, with nearly 90 per cent of SEIU-West members designated as essential and facing hefty fines if they go on strike.

SAHO's offer includes general wage increases of four per cent for 2008-09, two per cent for 2009-10 and 1.5 per cent for 2010-11 — with the retroactive pay ceasing to accumulate as of April 1 — and an additional two per cent on April 1, 2011.