



Prince Edward Island Nurses' Union

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To: All PEINU Members

March 15, 2023

**Collective Bargaining Update for PEINU Members**

RE: Employer refusing to bargain during the election

To all PEINU Members:

It is with regret and overwhelming frustration that I am writing to inform members of PEINU that we have been given notice that Health PEI is refusing to continue bargaining during the election and will not be participating in the next set of meetings that were scheduled for the week of March 20<sup>th</sup>. They have suggested returning to the table June 14-15 in anticipation of when a new government might be sworn in.

In light of this new development, the Union is seeking advice from legal counsel to determine what recourse may be available under the *Labour Act* and we will provide further updates to members as new information becomes available. In the meantime, I feel it is important for you to know what this means for our Union, why it's such a problem, and what every member can do about it because... **You have been waiting long enough!**

As you know, the collective agreement expired 2 years ago on March 31<sup>st</sup> – it is the longest that we have ever been without a collective agreement but it is not for lack of effort by the Union's negotiating committee. The mandate from our members was significant; accepting old or outdated terms in a new collective agreement that won't meet the needs and realities of our members (or the employer) was simply not an option. We have had more than 25 meeting dates since bargaining started in October 2021. Unfortunately, we have struggled to get sufficient blocks of dates, or get the dedicated attention from the employer to conclude these negotiations in a more timely manner.

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**Nurses deserve to know how they will be compensated for their work.**

Regardless of any promises made during an election campaign, the reality is that our province's ability to attract and retain RNs & NPs at Health PEI is not likely to improve without a new collective agreement. The opportunities outside of Health PEI are endless; Nurses want to work for employers that treat them with respect and can demonstrate the value they place on RNs & NPs by providing better wages, better benefits, better work-life balance, and fewer frustrations in the employment relationship.

**As Health PEI employees, our right to bargain collectively should never be affected by the government's decision to call an early election.**

There is no legal principle that would prevent Health PEI from bargaining during an election. The *Civil Service Act* doesn't apply to employees of Health PEI and they are *supposed* to operate at arm's length from government. Nevertheless, we've been told that the "caretaker period" will be applied to Health PEI in the same way it applies to government officials and employees of the Civil Service.

This means that Health PEI is not allowed to engage in any new business whether it's with PEINU or anyone else. They will not be able to continue collective bargaining, make any new agreements, offer any new incentives, or launch any new programs until after a new government is sworn in.

**Health PEI and PEINU will remain bound by the terms of a collective agreement that expired two years ago.**

Unfortunately, our negotiations are at a critical juncture in terms of staffing and timing. Health PEI is already short-staffed to the point of being considered a crisis and acknowledges being unable to provide safe nurse-patient staffing levels in many areas. Now instead of trying to conclude a collective agreement that could help stabilize the healthcare system and provide much needed job security for Nurses, we will be heading into another summer when Permanent Employees will be planning to take some well-deserved vacation; Casual & Part-Time Employees tend to pick-up fewer extra shifts; and PEI's population will increase substantially from tourism.

**Without a new agreement, Health PEI's ability to cover vacant shifts in the upcoming rotations and summer schedules – not to mention recruit or retain Nurses – will be very limited.**

- ✘ The two retention incentives (for retirement deferrals and hard-to-recruit positions) that were announced by government in October 2022 as part of an \$8M initiative will not go forward.
  - ✘ The newest Premium for picking up extra shifts in 24/7 bed-based care will not be extended beyond the existing term which expires on March 31<sup>st</sup>.
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- ✘ The previous agreements that have been negotiated for summer incentives and vacation deferral options will not be re-negotiated in time to make a difference this year.

Sufficed to say, the decision to stop bargaining – whether it was made by Health PEI or the Minister/Government – is likely to have a lasting, negative impact on the province's healthcare system.

**Nurses cannot continue to shoulder the burden of responsibility or guilt for a crumbling healthcare system.**

As Nurses, we take our professional responsibilities seriously and I know that we will continue to care for our patients. I also know that we will continue to go above and beyond for our patients; it is in our nature and engrained in the *Code of Ethics* that we take in becoming RNs and NPs. What we cannot continue to do, is allow the employer – an extension of government – to take advantage of our goodwill and good natures, to hold a crumbling healthcare system together. In the absence of systemic changes, the systemic failures – including chronic, unsafe staffing levels – that we're facing in healthcare will continue; responsibility for which rests squarely on the shoulders of government.

**Nurses are well-respected professionals and important advocates for public healthcare.**

Healthcare is an issue for every Islander regardless of your political views or affiliations so I would encourage all of our members to **Speak Up!** and **Speak Out!** As a Nurse, you have a unique insight into healthcare issues as Nurses working in the public healthcare system. You bear witness to the barriers and challenges patients are facing everyday. You are an important advocate for better healthcare for patients.

**You are also an important advocate for your:**

- Colleagues – the other nurses and healthcare workers who experience the traumas and stresses of working in healthcare;
- Neighbours & Community Members – who you try to assist when they encounter barriers to access in the healthcare system; and
- Family & Friends – who you support when they need healthcare services.

Perhaps most importantly, you are an important advocate for:

- Yourself – as both a Nurse working in the healthcare system and an Islander with your own needs and challenges in accessing healthcare in PEI.

Please share your concerns with the candidates running for office in your district– and all your friends & family & communities – and make sure they know that you have been without an employment contract for 2 years.

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**We are in this together! We are stronger together!**

On behalf of the Negotiating Committee and our entire Executive and Board of Directors, I can assure you that the Union is committed to fulfilling our objectives; to promoting and advancing the welfare of our members and fighting for systemic changes on behalf of our patients; and to getting Health PEI to return to the bargaining table. Until then, we will continue to **Speak Up!** and **Speak Out!** in solidarity with you as Nurses – and as Islanders – because we know that our healthcare system depends on it!

Respectfully yours,



Barbara Brookins, RN  
PEINU President

*PS. If you haven't already, please register for the Member-Only page on the website, follow & share content from the Union's social media accounts, and please continue to share your concerns with your Local Union Presidents and Worksite Reps.*