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THE APTS IN NEGOTIATIONS

MANAGEMENT PROPOSAL FOR THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR: *nothing to attract and retain much-needed personnel*

The proposal filed before the holidays by the management bargaining committee for the health and social services sector (CPNSSS) has nothing encouraging for upcoming talks to renew our collective agreement. Although management representatives reiterated their desire to reach an agreement before the March 31, 2010 deadline, their position is not conducive to a prompt settlement and could bog down negotiations in a long and difficult process for all parties. Moreover, their proposal illustrates a lack of genuine political will to solve the problem of shortages of specialized personnel in the sector.

The APTS, through its demands filed in October, has been pressing representatives of the health and social services sector to recruit more technical and professional personnel and retain current staff in order to prevent work overloads that too often lead to burnout. Management, however, instead of tackling the source of its personnel's health problems, is trying to reduce salary insurance benefits and the number of days of sick leave!

AN IMPENDING DISASTER THAT'S BEEN A LONG TIME IN THE MAKING

For a number of years now, hospitals and health and social service centres have not managed to recruit enough Cégep and university graduates to fill the growing number of jobs that have chronic shortages. Nurses are not the only ones facing this situation. An equally worrisome number of physiotherapists, occupational therapists, radiology technologists and audiologists are affected, to name but a few of APTS members' professions that are experiencing shortages. But the worst is yet to come.

In Québec, the number of people in the sector who are retiring each year should reach a peak in 2012 and remain at peak levels until 2020. In the course of the next collective agreement, then, thousands of employees will retire and our members will be no exception. This is already the case in some departments where hardly a month goes by without someone announcing her or his retirement.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF?

In the 1990s, mass retirements linked to a process of "stabilizing public finances" gave us a foretaste of the difficulties the sector faces when a critical number of experienced resources leave in a short period of time. In light of this adverse experience and the current alarming forecasts, isn't it urgent to take action?

As we outlined in the last issue of *The APTS in Negotiations*, failure to retain current resources and attract new ones will heighten the odds of the voracious private sector stepping in to fill any gap in the public sector's ability to deliver a sufficient number of quality services. The APTS thinks the government is wrong to let the private sector carve out such a place for itself rather than finding public solutions to overcome current and future shortages.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF? (CONTINUED)

The problem of labour shortages is a highly familiar one, and the APTS has been in “solution mode” for some time now. In this round of negotiations, the APTS drafted union demands designed to heighten the attractiveness of these jobs in the public sector and curb a growing exodus of employees to the private sector. These demands are not solely intended to further its members’ interests - in fact, as the public system does a better job and is less expensive, patients, employers and taxpayers have everything to gain by investing in it to improve it.

To make public-sector jobs more attractive, the APTS is calling for measures to facilitate greater work-family balance. The measures include more flexible work-schedule arrangements to take into account the constraints that its members - 85% of whom are women - have to contend with. These members often have the responsibility of caring for their children or aging parents. The APTS is also demanding that the government provide better recognition of additional professional responsibilities that are assumed by certain groups of employees, and compensation for those whose work involves major inconvenience factors.

FOR BETTER RECOGNITION OF PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES AND INCONVENIENCE FACTORS

Public declarations made by government spokespersons regularly refer to the expertise of employees in the health and social services sector and their essential role in ensuring that the sector runs smoothly. Why is it, then, that the government can’t walk the talk when it comes time to recognize and encourage this expertise?

In the sector, professional and technical personnel receive very little respect for professional autonomy, skills improvement and mid-career professional development. To create conditions that are conducive to improving and maintaining these skills, the APTS is demanding in particular that the institutions be given increased budgets for the development of human resources, which are desperately lacking at present. It is also calling for reimbursement of the cost of compulsory training required by the various professional orders to which its members are obliged to belong.

The APTS is also demanding that clauses be added in the collective agreement on skill transfers between peers, such as mentoring and imparting knowledge to student trainees. It is also demanding provisions for employees who have specific expertise, as well as for employees taking part in special projects.

Lastly, it is difficult to induce employees to perform work which involves particular difficulties that are not properly compensated. The APTS is thus demanding compensation for the inconvenience of working evenings, nights, on weekends and statutory holidays, and for working with people who have psychiatric problems.

These various sectorial demands that the APTS prepared last fall are designed to make the sector more attractive for current and future personnel. But in the management proposal filed on December 17, it doesn’t appear that the government’s “take” on the situation is the same.

In this critical period for the future of our healthcare system, we nonetheless have to be equipped with the means of getting through the crisis, in the interests not only of those who work in the sector but above all, of the patients thereby served. From this perspective, contrary to what some experts would have us believe, union interests and the interests of the population are far from being divergent - in fact, they coincide.

In the coming months, given the ambitious timetable set for this round of bargaining, the APTS and the CPNSSS will be holding a number of meetings to clarify their positions and arrive at a negotiated settlement. We will keep you regularly informed of any developments. In the meantime, for further information on contract talks, you can consult the Info-Négo hotline at 450 670-5396 or 1 800 263-4469 or visit our website at www.aptsq.com.