



# MOVING AHEAD:

AHS-GSS wildcat strikes drives breakthrough in bargaining

by Tyler Bedford, Communications Staff

**In the early hours** of March 9, a long-awaited tentative contract agreement between AUPE's 22,000 General Support Services members and Alberta Health Services was reached. But it was the extraordinary event less than a month before the deal that captivated Albertans and showed the employer just how essential GSS member are.

The sun was barely awake on Feb. 16 when word began to spread that hundreds of health care workers at the Royal

Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton began to leave their posts for the sidewalks of Kingsway Avenue.

Staff at the Royal Alexandra Hospital, discouraged by nearly a year of frustrating negotiations with Alberta Health Services, walked off the job.

It was an illegal health care strike - a wildcat strike - and it was just the beginning.

As word of the actions taken by workers at the Royal Alexandra Hospital spread to worksites across Alberta, so too did the

wildcat strikes.

From Lethbridge to Claresholm, Edmonton, Calgary, Cold Lake and Red Deer, to Hinton, Leduc and many other communities, GSS staff, who do everything from lab work, security, assisting therapists, surgical sterilization and much more, stopped working.

"The wildcat strikes took us by surprise, but we fully supported our members' decision," said AUPE President Guy Smith. "We knew the level of frustration was very

## THE ROAD TO THE TENTATIVE AGREEMENT

**MARCH 30, 2011**  
Bargaining begins for first post-transition collective agreement for 22,000 AHS-General Support Services employees province-wide



**GSS Bargaining Committee 2011** Tonya Malo, Willis Pollett, Lynne Hansen, Michele Taylor, Darren Graham, Reg Hilt, Connie Quayle, Ken Rose, Karen Weiers, Stacey McKenna, Kevin Davediuk (Negotiator)

**JUNE 14, 2011** Talks break down after 14 days of negotiations and the committee files for mediation, citing little progress made with AHS



**SEPT. 7, 2011**  
Mediation begins with AHS; committee assigned 17 days of mediation.

high. To take the brave step of job action showed just how angry members were that AHS refused to treat them as an equal part of Alberta's health care team."

In January, the GSS bargaining unit rejected a mediator's contract recommendations by an overwhelming 95 per cent. In February, AHS responded by offering the group even less than what was rejected in the mediator's report.

"That offer pushed many to the breaking point," said Smith.

Those on the picket lines echoed that point.

Al Pelletier, Vice-Chair of AUPE Local 054/006, told CTV Edmonton from the strike line at the Royal Alexandra Hospital that "none of us want to be out here but we have no choice because Alberta Health Services put us in this position."

As the day progressed, approximately 20 worksites saw job action at some point, involving thousands of members. It caught the attention of top-level politicians and engulfed the agenda of social media in Alberta.

Leader of the Official Opposition and emergency room doctor at the Royal Alexandra Hospital, Raj Sherman, visited striking workers outside the Royal Alex, reminding them that the hospital works because of the individual efforts of each and every one of them.

Alberta's New Democrats invited 10 AUPE members from the Royal Alexandra Hospital to be guests in the legislature that day while NDP Leader Brian Mason gave a member's statement on the situation. Mason said that Alberta Health Services had been "bargaining in bad faith, seeking to bully workers who make far less than what is needed for their families."

That message was also echoed by readers on the *Edmonton Journal's* website. One commenter stated, "when it comes to my health care I'd like to know the person sterilizing equipment before my surgery has his or her mind on what they are doing and not thinking about the bills they can't pay."

Referring to AHS' low-ball final proposal in February, a message of support on Twitter, read, "if AHS was TRULY concerned about Albertans' right to health care, they would have made a fair offer."

As pressure on AHS mounted from many sides, the Alberta Labour Relations Board scheduled a hearing to deal with the situation that afternoon and following hours of talks, an arrangement was reached to go back to bargaining, with both parties agreeing to mediation-arbitration.

The Labour Board talks officially ended the wildcat strikes after less than one day. AUPE made an agreement with AHS that guaranteed members who went out on strike would not face fines or be disciplined.

The consensus to end the strike after one day relieved many, including the *Calgary Herald's* Don Braid, who noted the importance of GSS workers in his Feb. 17 column: "the threat of a full strike will end there; or so we should hope. The thought of 22,000 support workers on an extended strike is far too alarming."

Undeniably, having 22,000 hospital workers on strike is alarming.

Dr. James Muir, Assistant Professor of History and Classics at the University of Alberta told *Direct Impact*, "wildcats come about, regardless of the union, because of serious problems at work and a complete failure of the employer to seriously try to resolve the issues."

Wildcat strikes, Muir suggests, can be

quite effective.

The GSS wildcats were effective and left a huge impression on the public and politicians alike, prompting the employer to act swiftly, resulting in a deal both sides could agree on without the use of an arbitrator.

Following five days of talks, a tentative three-year agreement was reached offering GSS members shift and weekend premium rates equal to other AHS union contracts by 2013; an increase to the health and spending account to \$600 which becomes flexible in January 2013; supplemental vacation equal to other union contracts with AHS, and a nine per cent wage increase over the life of the contract.

It was a vast improvement over the employer's initial offer of zero per cent and a lump sum in the first year, two per cent in the second year and a cost of living adjustment in the third year.

AUPE also won satisfactory improvements to hours of work, stat holidays, layoff and recall language, part time definitions and classifications.

Both AUPE and AHS recommended ratification of the tentative deal.

"I'm tremendously proud of the tenacity and resolve GSS members showed throughout some very difficult bargaining with this employer. They've proved they're willing to stand up and do what it takes to be treated fairly," said President Smith. "It's quite inspiring to all AUPE members and to me, personally."

"The tentative agreement reached, partly because of the strikes, is an important step toward reaching workplace equality for this group," said Smith. "And they deserve nothing less." 🍁

**JAN. 19, 2012**

**Mediator's recommendations rejected** by more than 95 per cent of voting members as AHS offers little in the way of language and monetary improvements

**FEB. 8, 2012**

**AHS drops bombshell** with its final monetary position, offering even less than what was rejected in the mediator's report

**FEB. 16, 2012**

**Wildcat strike** erupts at Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton at 7 a.m. Wildcats soon follow at worksites province-wide, capturing political, media and public attention. Strikes end later that day after agreement to med-arb by AUPE and AHS



**FEB. 21, 2012**  
**Mediation-arbitration starts** between AUPE and AHS

**MARCH 9, 2012**  
**Tentative Agreement reached**, in principle, between AUPE and AHS

