

A Message for Labour Day 2013

# Protecting our collective agreement helps protect all working people's rights

Nurses' work is never done ...  
the fight goes on for what was won!

*By Heather Smith, President, United Nurses of Alberta*

Labour Day is upon us. Each year at this time unions remind the public and their members of the tremendous gains made for working Canadians since Sir John A. MacDonald, Canada's first prime minister, pushed the Trade Union Act through Parliament. The act, passed in 1872, made it legal for working people to negotiate through collective bargaining.

Canadian worker advocates were really active well before that time. Indeed, the act sprang from the effort to legislate a nine-hour work day by the progressive Canadians of the day. It took a few more years than its advocates had hoped to achieve that goal, but eventually limits on how long workers could be made to work began to seem normal.

Since then, unions have contributed to such benefits for all working people as public health insurance, public hospitals and health care, overtime pay, child labour laws, workers' compensation, occupational health and safety legislation, employment insurance, fair pensions and even the weekend.

And they continue to work hard on behalf of Canada's middle-class families, which is the answer to the question posed by those who ask, "*But what have you done for me lately?*"

Every day, union activists are working to make workplaces safer – as UNA nurses at Grande Prairie's Queen Elizabeth II Hospital did when they fought to protect their ability to refuse unsafe work. Unions work to make workplaces friendlier for young families by improving child care. They struggle for women's rights by ensuring all working people are treated the same way in their bargaining units.

In this context, it's important for UNA members to remember the collective agreements our members have negotiated since our union was formed in 1977 are a significant part of this legacy.

Fair wages, requirements for proper notice, the right to take vacations and holidays, overtime provisions, professional responsibility protections, the requirement to have an RN on duty on all units, layoff and recall rights, posting of vacancies, hours of work and scheduling – all these provisions of UNA's collective agreements are part of the vast legacy of rights won by unions for working people.

Sad to say, in 2013, in UNA's current round of negotiations with health care employers, every one of these provisions is under assault by Alberta Health Services and other employers. More troubling still, this attack on our rights as UNA members is part of a broader pattern of anti-union activities by governments and corporations throughout North America.

In many ways, in 2013, we face the toughest labour relations climate since the Depression of the 1930s.

This is why it is important for UNA members to resist these efforts by our employers to roll back our hard-won gains. In the short term, we can assert our pride in our union and our pride in our profession while speaking up for our patients by *wearing the white* at work.

As these tough negotiations proceed, though, we need to remember that our workplace safety, childcare laws, and equal pay – and even our right to stay home for the Labour Day long weekend – won't last long without active, committed UNA members determined to defend the agreements their predecessors in our union fought to create.



Heather Smith