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Another big union signs deal with B.C.

Latest public-sector deal gives members 10-per-cent wage increases over four years

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VANCOUVER -- Six months after B.C.'s public-sector workers teetered on the verge of a general strike, the labour feud with the province is showing signs of easing.

But it's not quite spring yet for labour harmony in the province, with two of the largest and most militant unions still to sign on to receive their share of a billion-dollar bonus.

The latest deal, signed during the weekend, was with the B.C. Government and Service Employees' Union and its 24,000 members. Union leader George Heyman urged members to accept average wage increases of 10 per cent over four years.

A week ago, the union walked out of talks with the government, saying a \$4,000 bonus was not enough to keep negotiators at the table if there were not better job-security guarantees.

Mr. Heyman said the union was able to talk the government down from a higher cap on job losses due to privatization and persuaded it to add another 1.5-per-cent increase in wages.

The bonus the government dangled to get a deal signed before March 31 was important, Mr. Heyman said, because it offset the holes in bank accounts that workers racked up after two years without pay raises.

"We can't stop a government that is clearly ideologically bent on privatizing and contracting out public services," he said yesterday. "But we have been told that this government wants to start a conversation and move away from confrontation and we hope this round of bargaining has begun to achieve that."

During an illegal strike by teachers last fall, emotions ran high after the provincial government's attempt to impose a zero-per-cent increase settlement. Government employees joined other public-sector workers in a rally of 12,000 people at the legislature in support of teachers.

Still to reach agreements are the B.C. Nurses' Union and the B.C. Teachers' Federation, which has until June 30 to sign and qualify for the bonus because its contract isn't up until that month.

Nurses union president Debra McPherson said yesterday talks are moving slowly. Chief among the nurses' concerns are workloads and policy issues such as violence in the workplace. The workload part of the negotiations began yesterday.

"We began bargaining on March 6 and have been bargaining continuously since then," Ms. McPherson said. "We are on schedule and like the others, we hope to conclude by March 31. The only pressure I feel is getting the best deal for our members."

John Fryer, chair of the advisory committee on labour-management relations in the federal public service, said while one-third of workers have been signed, the more "intractable groups," such as teachers and nurses, are still negotiating.

"To put it into some kind of perspective, the bonus strategy is working, but some important groups, who make up a majority of the provincial budget, have not signed on yet," said Prof. Fryer, who teaches labour relations at the University of Victoria. "What seems to be happening is offering workers who haven't had a raise in three years a cheque for \$4,000 is very appealing and seems to be driving settlements."

Once given, employees may expect to get a bonus in their next round of talks, Prof. Fryer said.

Finance Minister Carole Taylor said yesterday that the idea of using a bonus is part of the government's strategy to do things differently. "We thought about how to do that, and I asked my staff to make suggestions and at the end of the day, this was one of the options and we felt this was a good option," Ms. Taylor said.

She won't say what other options the government considered before it began negotiations with the unions because those incentives may still be used in future talks.

Teachers federation president Jinny Sims said she and her members are eager to begin negotiating, but the government has not set a meeting until April 7. "We should be able to get to a negotiated settlement within a few weeks," she said, "if we're able to address

teachers' working conditions and the need for a significant wage increase."

Who's in the deal?

\$1-billion

The bonus the B.C. government promised public-sector workers if unions signed agreements before March 31.

100,424

The number of workers represented by unions that have signed. They include:

The B.C. Medical Association: 8,800 members

Hospital Employees Union: 44,700 members

B.C. Government Employees Union: 24,470 members

78,309

The number of workers represented by other unions that are still negotiating and trying for the deadline. They include:

B.C. Nurses Union: 29,000 members

Community Health and Community Social Services workers in three unions: 15,000 members

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