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## Final union reaches deal with province

Medical association to get \$3,700 bonus

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VANCOUVER -- The government's strategy to achieve labour peace for the next four years appears to have succeeded, with the last remaining union agreeing to a deal just 29 minutes before the midnight deadline.

The Professional Association of Residents of British Columbia, representing about 700 medical students, will receive a compounded wage increase of 10.7 per cent over four years and a \$3,700 signing bonus in its deal.

With the completion of the agreement, all unions with contracts expiring on March 31 have signed on for at least four more years with the government.

The B.C. Nurses' Union also reached an agreement in the 11th hour, with a four-year contract for 14.2 per cent over four years and what it deemed significant gains for nurses in workload issues.

BCNU president Debra McPherson said that immediate concerns over wages, as well as long-range plans to re-establish staffing levels, were addressed in the agreement.

Ms. McPherson said the bonus played a role in getting both sides to the negotiating table early and acted as an incentive for continued talks during the inevitable periods when disagreements arose.

Nurses were divided into two camps heading into the negotiation, and Ms. McPherson said the agreement should satisfy both.

"One group believed the system would never improve and we should just get our money. The other part of our group said we need these long-term solutions and we had to find an agreement that would bridge both of those concerns," she said yesterday.

Pending ratification, almost 225,000 public-sector employees will receive bonuses. The B.C. Teachers' Federation, with 39,000 members, remains the only large union still to sign, but because their agreement expires at the end of June, they are still negotiating.

The success of getting all the unions to sign on took persistence from all sides, Finance Minister Carole Taylor said.

Besides wage increases, Ms. Taylor said, all the agreements included new policy initiatives designed to improve workplace conditions.

For doctors, that means additional funding for technology upgrades and incentives for general practitioners in smaller centres. For nurses, those provisions include higher pay increases for workers in difficult nighttime and weekend shifts.

When she received the call that the last outstanding union had signed at 11:31 p.m. Friday, Ms. Taylor said, she felt relieved.

"The approach from the beginning was to offer flexibility on the financial side and flexibility on the ideas side. We applied that to every single table. There was consistency in the approach but the solutions were all different," she said yesterday.

Another last-minute deal with the province's 15,000 community social services workers -- including employees who care for people with physical, mental and developmental disabilities, at-risk youth and women fleeing family violence -- was also signed, but not without some bitterness.

About 2,000 of those workers are in the Canadian Union of Public Employees, and B.C. president Barry O'Neill said he is disappointed that the government didn't recognize the significant rollbacks that the sector has suffered. Details of the agreement have not been released yet.

"It's fair to say members have fallen behind significantly with the cost of living. We're not willing to jeopardize the signing bonus," Mr. O'Neill said yesterday. "This is the group most disadvantaged and the one sector with the most significant retention issues."

Mr. O'Neill said that despite the failings with the agreement, he is encouraging ratification because it would not be fair to workers to lose out on the bonus.

John Fryer, a University of Victoria professor, said the \$1-billion signing bonus has never been tried before on such a massive scale

in public-sector bargaining.

"The bribe of the bonus appears to have driven the negotiations," he said. "For those workers who have had no wage increases for three to six years, having the bonus waved in front of them was irresistible."

Prof. Fryer, who teaches labour economics, said yesterday that he had not expected the province could achieve all the agreements it reached. "Under no circumstances did I believe that a bonus would have the public sector unions in B.C. all stampede to settlement."

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