

PS unions brace for tough, divisive bargaining

BY KATHRYN MAY, OTTAWA CITIZEN SEPTEMBER 15, 2013

OTTAWA — Leaders of 18 unions representing Canada's public servants will meet in a day-long summit this week to develop a common strategy as they prepare to face off with the Conservative government in collective bargaining that's expected to be one of the most divisive and politically charged in years.

The government makes no secret of some of the concessions it wants from employees at the round of bargaining that begins in 2014, and at the top of the list is overhauling sick leave and replacing it with a short-term disability plan. At least 17 of the 27 collective agreements that Treasury Board negotiates with federal unions expire next year.

The nature of the meeting is unprecedented for the 18 federal unions, but several union leaders say they also have to be ready for the Conservative Party's broader assault on labour at its upcoming convention with resolutions that would blunt unions' power, limit their involvement in political activity and strike at the heart of their survival — mandatory union dues.

The closed-door session will be held in Montreal on Tuesday as union leaders from across the country converge for the annual meeting of the joint union and management National Joint Council (NJC) that begins the following day.

Ron Cochrane, a NJC co-chair, said such a meeting is unusual but the government has rarely been as "open and blatant" about some of the reforms it wants to bring public service pay and benefits in line with the private sector.

"They are very direct about what they want so I think it's time we sat down as a group and planned our strategy," he said.

Federal unions have rarely felt so under siege and their relationship with a government rarely been so strained.

The largest unions chided Treasury Board President Tony Clement in a July letter for "public service bashing," and accused him of "managing to demean, demoralize and discredit" when announcing reforms while failing to inform or consult unions.

Government officials counter unions aren't blameless in the deteriorating relationship. The Public Service Alliance led an aggressive "Harper Hates Me" campaign, including several controversial ads, that fanned hostilities between the parties.

Clement's office argues Treasury Board has been "consulting with unions and attempting to work with them on a number of important files throughout the summer."

Lisa Blais, president of the Association of Justice Counsel, said the government's getting tough on

unions and public servants will be a part of the Conservatives election campaign when Canadians go to the polls in 2015 so unions have to be “more united than ever.”

“We worry as the election nears because seem to be punching bags for this government when they need to divert attention from really pressing issues,” she said. “In our view, it was no coincidence that Treasury Board made a series of announcements (affecting public servants) when the Senate scandal was at its peak.”

She argues the tone for the next round of bargaining has been set by the long and intractable strike of foreign service officers. Both sides have dug in on their positions and the government recently got its knuckles rapped by the Public Service Labour Relations Board for “bad faith bargaining” with the striking diplomats.

The agenda is packed but the top hot-button issues that will be divided up among a group of working committees include:

- * Getting rid of the existing sick leave provisions and replacing it with a fixed number of sick days and introducing a new short-term disability plan.

- * The newly announced employee performance review, the legislation, Treasury Board’s new directive and the impact on collective agreements.

- * modernization of the pay system, including a controversial plan to introduce a new pay in arrears system that would claw back four per cent of public service payroll from employees cheques beginning in January 2014.

- * Treasury Board’s proposal to double the premiums for retirees who belong to the public service health care plan and also change the eligibility so retired public servants can’t join the plan unless they worked 10 years in the bureaucracy.

“We don’t want to get caught off guard. We want facts in our hands, an analysis of all the existing plans in Canada and share information with other bargaining agents. So we can proactive and not reactive,” said Claude Poirier, president of the Canadian Association of Professional Employees.(CAPE)

“This is about looking an difficult problems so we can make decisions based on facts. It’s not just about opposing the employer,” he said.

Federal unions represent a broad range of employees who have very different jobs, education, interests and expectations from the workplace. They represent dockyard workers, prison and custom guards and clerks, as well as scientists and other professionals who traditionally don’t embrace militant union tactics or the broader labour movement.

“We have to get everyone on the same page, discussing and agreeing where we need to go and how to get there together,” said Gary Corbett, president of the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, which represents professional employees.

“This isn’t a fight against foreign service officers or PIPSC or CAPE other employees, it is against all

unions so we have to abandon our identities. We are in all in the house of labour but in different rooms.”

The unions also don't want to be caught off guard like they were in the last round of bargaining when the government took away severance pay for voluntary departures with little warning and struck a trade-off package with the largest union, the Public Service Alliance of Canada, that divided PSAC and all the other unions.

Unions are braced for the possibility the government will approach negotiations for revamping sick leave similar to the special round of bargaining it called several years ago to get rid of severance pay.

In that case, the government targeted the largest union, PSAC, struck a deal and then offered the same take-it-or-leave deal to all the other unions. Many objected and took it to arbitration but arbitrators sided with the government because the largest union accepted it. Union leaders say that “divide and conquer” approach won't happen this time.

PSAC President Robyn Benson has already drawn a line in the sand and refuses to budge on sick leave. She argues the existing sick leave plan can be fixed and any problems are a “management failures” caused by managers who failed to enforce existing rules and guidelines.

“There's no secret sick leave is on the agenda. Clement has come out swinging and so have I so that is a discussion we will have,” said Benson.

“And I certainly think that when look at the government of the day, it has an agenda and we are looking to protecting the rights of our members ... heading into collective bargaining in 2014.”

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