



Manitoba Federation of Labour Submission to the Manitoba Legislative Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs

Bill 29: The Health Sector Bargaining Unit Review Act

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The Manitoba Federation of Labour (MFL) is Manitoba's central labour body, chartered by the Canadian Labour Congress, to represent the interests of more than 100,000 unionized workers in our province, from all regions and all sectors, including Manitoba's health care sector. The MFL works to promote high quality public services, good jobs, fair wages and benefits, safe working conditions, as well as greater equality and social and environmental justice.

The following submission outlines our reasons for opposing Bill 29 (*The Health Sector Bargaining Union Review Act*), and the reasons why we're calling on government to put this Bill aside and, instead, come to the table and work with the public sector unions that represent Manitoba's exceptionally hard-working and caring health care professionals on a model that will work better for everyone.

We believe that providing the best possible patient care, and supporting those who provide that care, should be the overriding focus of health care reform in Manitoba, including with respect to bargaining. And nobody cares more, and invests more blood, sweat and tears into providing the best possible patient care than the 40,000+ hard working women and men who are the backbone of Manitoba's health care system – the nurses, orderlies, building maintenance staff, health care aides, physicians, nurse practitioners, paramedics, dietary staff, lab technicians, clerical and finance staff, trades workers, and many others.

Working together, health care unions have put forward an alternative to Bill 29, which we have presented to government and are awaiting feedback. Our alternative would have the following key benefits:

1. It could be implemented more quickly than Bill 29;
2. It would avoid the uncertainty, disruption and distraction of new union representation votes, which also undermine the democratic decisions already made by health care workers about their current union representation; and

3. It would still achieve the government's objective of reducing the number of collective agreements.

We urge the government to hit the stop button – or, at a minimum, the pause button – on Bill 29, and allow us some time to work with Manitoba Health on a better way forward.

When Premier Pallister first started expressing concern last fall about the number of collective agreements in health care, suggesting that they were somehow cumbersome to the system, the unions that represent health care workers were surprised, and a bit puzzled. While it's true that there are many different collective agreements covering the large number of different occupations and workplaces that exist in our \$6 billion public health care system, major bargaining issues, like wages and benefits, are collectively bargained at a single, streamlined, central bargaining table.

And when we were contacted by government and asked us to coordinate a group of health care union leaders to start meeting with government staff to talk about potential restructuring of health care bargaining, we made it clear that we believe the current model works well, but we were prepared – and we remain prepared - to work constructively with government on bargaining reform, in light their insistence that the number of collective agreements be reduced.

We have maintained throughout that three principles should guide any bargaining reform efforts:

1. Protecting and improving patient care;
2. Supporting and respecting health care professionals in their demanding and challenging work; and
3. Respecting the democratic decisions already made by health care workers about their current union representation.

And with these principles in mind, we have put forward a simple and practical alternative to Bill 29, which we believe will work better for all parties, while still achieving the government's objective of reducing the number of collective agreements.

Our alternative proposal would leave existing bargaining agents in place, thereby avoiding the time, cost and disturbance of representation votes. Instead, we propose the establishment of Union Bargaining Councils, which would correspond to, and bargain with the Employer Bargaining Councils proposed in Bill 29. Under our alternative, Employer Councils and Union Councils would take over responsibility for bargaining.

Following the same model that Bill 29 sets out for the establishment of Employer Bargaining Councils, we've proposed that a Union Bargaining Council would be established for each region, by sector, of the unions representing workers in those sectors. Unions certified to represent employees would continue to perform all of the usual functions of a certified bargaining agent, except collective bargaining. In this way, health care workers would continue to receive the same support and servicing from their existing, familiar, union representatives.

The motive behind Bill 29 was described to us as "enabling legislation": a hammer in the event that a workable solution could not be reached cooperatively with health care unions. However, we haven't yet had a good opportunity to sit down with government and work out an alternative. Currently, government staff are unclear as to whether they have any mandate or authority to work with us on an alternative. Bill 29 is far more prescriptive than expected, including with respect to sector definitions, which we believe should recognize maintenance and trades as a distinct sector.

We're here tonight, representing Manitoba's health care workers, to affirm that an alternative to Bill 29 is not only doable, but preferable. Health care unions are willing and ready to work cooperatively together, and work with government to make this happen. If Employer Bargaining Councils are going to be established, it only makes

sense that Union Bargaining Councils be established as their counterpart. No one benefits from the disruption, cost and uncertainty that comes from forced representation votes – not patients, not workers and not the system. We urge government to halt Bill 29.

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