



The Roots of the '99 Strike

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April '98: The Nursing Shortage

The strike of 99 was heavily influenced by a growing shortage of nurses, which was predicted as early as 1997 by the Canadian Nurses Association, yet ignored by Saskatchewan politicians and health care employers. [See November 4, 1997 C.N.A news release and backgrounder on the nursing shortage](#)

Shortage of Registered Nurses a Public Safety Issue

The Saskatchewan Registered Nurses' Association held a meeting of provincial government, health district, union, employer and nursing education stakeholders on September 18, 1998, to discuss solutions to the shortage of registered nurses in the province. According to SRNA President Sandra Bassendowski, "The shortage of RN staff in our system has already become a serious public safety issue." [See CONCERN December '98 article.](#)

1998 Health Budget Bypasses Bedside

"Nurses report increasing incidents of risks to patient safety. Many nurses are constantly working overtime because of a shortage of staff. The government had the opportunity to direct the money to critical service issues, and instead the money is being spent on construction and other programs and missed the bedside completely." [SUN President Judy Junor in SUNSPOTS April 98](#) 

May '98: Nurses need negotiations now, members say

Nurses at the SUN annual meeting passed a resolution urging early bargaining to deal with urgent nursing staffing issues after hearing little from Minister of Health Clay Serby to reassure them that the government would act any time soon.

[Nursing shortage justifies early negotiations SUN's June 25 letter to SAHO.](#)

[Junor resigns to seek MLA seat. See SUNSPOTS May 98](#) 

June '98: 200 new nursing positions funded

Health Minister Clay Serby's May 19 announcement of 200 new nursing positions is clear evidence that the government has finally heard the message delivered by SUN and the province's nurses—that nurses need urgent relief and the system needs more nurses. Stung by SUN's criticism that April's \$88 million increase to the health budget missed the bedside completely, and widespread condemnation of Serby's slip about nurses' "six figure salaries," Saskatchewan Health is scrambling to establish credibility with a skeptical public and nursing community. [SUNSPOTS May 98](#) 

July '98: What's pay equity? \$10,000 a year

In July 1995 Jennifer Carr, a registered nurse at the Veteran's home in Saskatoon received a cheque

for \$29,513.60, a retroactive pay equity adjustment. She and her nursing colleagues earn \$52,133 annually at the top step, \$9,026 more than most other general duty nurses in the province. Pay equity would eliminate that gap. [See SUNSPOTS July 98](#) 

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October '98: "I'm tired, overworked and underpaid, when can we hold the strike vote?"

When Beverly Crossman, SUN executive director and chief negotiator asked nurses at the bargaining conference whether they would support the SUN bargaining committee with a March 31, 1999 deadline and a strike vote, there was no hesitation. "I'm tired, overworked and underpaid. When can we hold the strike vote?" was Suzanne Stewart's reply. Her comment was echoed by a clear majority who supported seeking a strike vote to cement support for pay equity, more permanent jobs, better staffing, more paid leaves and improved vacation.

[See SUNSPOTS October 98](#) Junor, Atkinson handed health portfolio-now what? 

When Premier Romanow talked to the media after his new cabinet was sworn in at Government House in Regina on September 21, he chose newly-minted health ministers Pat Atkinson and former SUN president Junor to stand by his side. [See SUNSPOTS October 98](#) 

Nurses are tired, overworked, and underpaid, we need:

- pay equity;
- more permanent jobs and better staffing;
- better vacation and paid family leave;
- extended health benefits;
- family friendly workplaces; and
- seniority driven access to more jobs

[See Negotiations 99 pamphlet.](#) 

November '98: Politicians pass buck to SAHO

Bargaining table the place to fix equity, nursing shortage, Ministers say

If nurses want pay equity and a solution to the nursing shortage, SUN should negotiate with SAHO and the health districts, not look to government, Health Minister Pat Atkinson and Associate Minister Judy Junor told SUNSPOTS on November 4. [See SUNSPOTS November 98](#) 

Will nurses strike in 1999 to achieve a fair collective agreement?

"Nurses are caregivers, so "rocking the boat" doesn't seem to come naturally. What about our patients, what about our families, what about our communities? There are so many stresses and uncertainties. But there is one certainty. Only negotiations offer the possibility of higher salaries to address the nursing shortage, and the possibility of better staffing. Unless nurses stand up for nursing and support each other, our profession and quality of the care we provide will continue to decline."

[See President Rosalee Longmoore's November 98 letter to all SUN members.](#)

December '98: 74% in favour of strike

December 9, 1998 SUN News Release "Nurses authorize strike action" 74% strike vote

As Karen Thevenot was recovering following her caesarean section at the Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon on December 8, she heard recovery room nurses talking about the strike vote. Karen, a 27-year-old nurse employed as an evening team leader at Tisdale Union Hospital said, "Oh, gee,

today's the day to vote, isn't it?" and asked whether she could vote at RUH. Local returning officers decided to bring the ballot box up to her room. Karen voted while her husband Guy held Ashley Renée, their first child, now three hours old. [See SUNSPOTS December 98.](#) 

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January '99: Forced overtime reveals deepening nursing shortage

[January 21, 1999 SUN News Release](#) "SAHO proposals would deepen nursing shortage – SUN"

[January 29, 1999 SUN News Release](#) "SUN meets nurse union counterparts to coordinate response to nursing shortage"

"I don't like anything about this place now. There is no time for us, everyone is just running." Hearing these comments from residents is the worst thing about the nursing shortage, according to long-term care nurse Sister Renée Buliard, employed at Pineview Terrace in Prince Albert. "The residents don't get the care and dignity they deserve, and nurses face high stress levels because of the shortage of staff, increased workload, no leadership and little or no support from management," Sister Renée told SUNSPOTS. [See SUNSPOTS January 99](#) 

February '99: "Overworked + undervalued = nursing shortage"

[February 1, 1999 SUN News Release](#)

"Nursing shortage bites"

After repeatedly pushing the snooze button in response to SUN's persistent alarms, Minister of Health Pat Atkinson was rudely awakened by the Regina Health District's announcement that, due to the nursing shortage, the district would start closing 64 beds February 1. That very day, SUN's "overworked + underpaid = nursing shortage" billboards went up in 30 locations in Regina, Saskatoon, North Battleford, Weyburn, Estevan, Moose Jaw, and Yorkton.

[See Overworked and Underpaid = Nursing Shortage Billboard](#) 

[See SUNSPOTS February 99](#) 

"The public appears to be solidly behind nurses."

"Despite SUN's recent success in alerting the public to the urgency and consequences of the nursing shortage, SAHO seems to be in denial.....The media and the public treat the excuses and false reassurances from politicians and health board administrators with considerable skepticism. (Murray Mandryk, a Regina legislative columnist, called Health Minister Pat Atkinson's claim that she was caught off guard by the nursing shortage as "unbelievable." He also said it was "unbelievable and unacceptable that those running the [Regina] health district-the highest paid civil servants in Saskatchewan now-could allow this [the closures] to happen."

[See President's February 1999 letter to SUN members](#)

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March '99: Strike looms as SAHO/government offer 2 little 2 late 2 fix shortage

[March 3, 1999 SUN News Release](#) "Nurses won't be silenced by Health district – SUN"

[March 12, 1999 SUN News Release](#) "Nurses invite health Ministers to "Run a mile in our shoes"

[March 23, 1999 SUN News Release](#) "SUN's shoes to show up at SAHO convention"

[March 29, 1999 SUN News Release](#) "White ribbon day for SUN bargaining committee"

"These empty shoes symbolize the nurses who are leaving this profession because of forced overtime and working conditions that are unacceptable and unsafe," SUN President Rosalee Longmoore told media representatives on March 12, as SUN members placed hundreds of old duty shoes on the steps of the legislature. The "Shoe-In," (also supported by nurses' children) received extensive media

coverage, generating headlines such as "Nurses Bare Their Soles". The event was sponsored to "help heel SAHO" and was preceded by an information picket line outside the Delta Hotel in Regina where negotiators were meeting. [See SUNSPOTS March 99](#) 
[March 30, 1999 SUN News Release](#) "Health Care Without Nurses?"

Health Care Without Nurses?

"Overworked and undervalued nurses are walking away from nursing and are not being replaced. A shortage of nurses in Saskatchewan means closed hospital beds, forced overtime and exhausted nurses. Exhausted nurses cannot continue to provide safe care! Nurses don't want to strike, but after months of negotiations, the government and the health districts stubbornly refuse to treat nurses with respect and fairness."

[Health Care Without Nurses card mailed to all Saskatchewan households late March, 1999.](#) 

April '99: Strike Diary

[An in-depth report on the events which finally led to a settlement.](#) 