



en Action

Federal Council
March 18, 19, 20 and 21 2003

VOLUME 16 NUMBER 1 • MARCH 2003



THE NEW CONTEXT

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The sociopolitical context has changed somewhat since last fall. The economy is still fragile, a problem that has even accentuated since the U.S. Government initiated the war against Iraq. This reality will continue to affect world economic growth and thus the Quebec economic climate.



Politically, the die is now cast. The coming to power of a Liberal government gives a fairly clear indication of the timing and context of the next round of negotiations. No doubt the Charest government will prefer to position all its players, deepen its knowledge of major issues and, above all, develop an intervention strategy on the themes debated and the commitments or promises made during the election campaign. Thus, it is very plausible that the negotiating process will begin very late in the fall.

Another unknown factor remains: the cost of the pay equity settlement and the new government's real will to resolve this issue quickly. One thing is certain. Our questions as health-care workers should be answered in the first weeks of its mandate.

Regarding future discussions concerning general salary increases and the pension plan, we still believe that, despite the different expiry dates of the various collective agreements applied in the network, the new government will continue the tradition of negotiating salary and pension plan issues with all Government employees.

The nursing environment: an ongoing trend ...

As we have often said, the budget cuts in the past decade, underfunding of the network, the decision-makers' lack of vision, particularly regarding workforce planning, and the nursing shortage have all contributed to the current state of the health-care network and the nursing profession's conditions of practice.

The position of nurses is a long way from improving in terms of the imbalance between workforce supply and demand and the resulting overwork. We know that this constantly growing workload in turn is a major cause of the difficulty in attracting and retaining nurses. The population is aging and access to health-care services is seriously compromised. There is an urgent need to break this vicious circle and take positive action on nurses' living and working conditions.

In this sense, the daring approach the Executive Committee has adopted, with the strong support of nurses in the institutions, appears to be the best way to contain the major nursing shortage and protect the gains in health care and services. Our main priorities essentially seek to:

- enable nurses to benefit from more free time to restore the balance between their personal and professional lives;
- grant all nurses incumbency in permanent positions, with the aim of reducing casualization, stabilizing the teams, ensuring the continuum of care and reducing workload;

Draft collective agreement

Nurses take a stand

FIIQ President Jennie Skene opened the Special Federal Council in March by reminding the delegates that the process of renewing the nurses' collective agreement began in March, with the consultation on negotiating priorities. She also reminded them that an analysis of the sociopolitical and union context, and the main issues for the next round of negotiations had been presented to the delegates at that time.

Last November, the Executive Committee decided that all of the members should debate the negotiating priorities that would have a direct impact on the causes of the current crisis in the nursing profession. For the Executive, these priorities should not only improve nurses' conditions of work and practice, but also assure the public of accessible quality health care.

After this first round of consultations on the priorities, a second round was held on the preliminary draft. Based on the resolutions adopted by members, delegates were able to determine the contents of part of the draft collective agreement.

Remember that the demands concerning the general salary increase, retirement, job titles, access to positions and recognition of academic education will be submitted to the local general meetings in September. The President therefore began with a quick overview of the context, positioning the issues for the upcoming negotiations.



Priorities a reminder



On March 18, 19, 20 and 21, over 600 nurses delegated from institutions held a Special Federal Council meeting in St-Hyacinthe, dedicated to the next round of negotiations for the collective agreement. During these four days, they debated the recommendations that emerged from the consultation of members last January. They also adopted part of the draft collective agreement. The debates focused on the main negotiating priorities on which the nurses had been consulted in fall 2002.

These negotiating priorities, presented to the Federal Council of November 2020, had received very strong support from nurses. Indeed, on the whole, nurses had adopted the proposed priorities by a vote of over 95%. This broad consensus was reconfirmed, because all the amendments and sub-amendments adopted at the Federal Council clarified or enriched these priorities without changing their initial objective. Here is a brief reminder of the negotiating priorities and their objectives*.

Restructuring of work time ...

...Reducing the number of work days for all nurses working full time would help to conciliate professional and personal life. Moreover, since working on the evening and night shifts is less appealing, the reduction of work time would be even greater on these shifts. Besides, a slight increase in the number of working hours each day and the resulting overlap in shifts would facilitate exchange of information and the organization of work and care. Undeniably, this would help to lighten the workload.

Moreover, better compensation for time spent at work on statutory holidays, instead of with family or friends, would recognize the inconvenience and stresses inherent in a nurse's work. For the vast majority of nurses, this difficulty in reconciling professional and personal life may persist throughout their professional careers. It would be fair if they finally received adequate compensation!

Finally, adaptation of the work environment by granting additional paid days off could give nurses of retirement age an incentive to extend their careers, thus limiting the perverse effects of the nursing shortage.

Stabilization of positions ...

...This would limit use of the availability list in the context of a shortage that all available resources should be normally be assigned to counter. For the FIIQ, it is clear that overusing the availability list undermines the continuum of care and hinders retention of nurses in the various work environments. Stabilizing the regular teams would mean that the vast majority of nurses would benefit from regular work schedules that are known in advance. This would also enable nurses to ensure greater availability for work.

By awarding a position to every nurse, stabilization of positions seeks to put an end to casualization, replacement management problems and virtually permanent reliance on overtime. Stabilization of positions also has the aim of reducing an excessive workload that is often unbearable and the source of constantly growing absenteeism. Finally, this would allow shortening of the normal annual vacation period, thus improving the living conditions at work for all nurses.

Maintenance and development of competencies ...

...These measures would make the work environment a learning place, a place that offers nurses training prospects and possibilities for developing their knowledge, a motivating and fulfilling place for nurses.

Currently, the impossibility of finding a replacement has become the universal excuse for employers in health-care institutions to cancel, postpone or simply not provide for in-service educational activities. The practice of nursing is increasingly complex and nurses have to adapt quickly to pharmacological, scientific and technological changes. In this context, in-service education is



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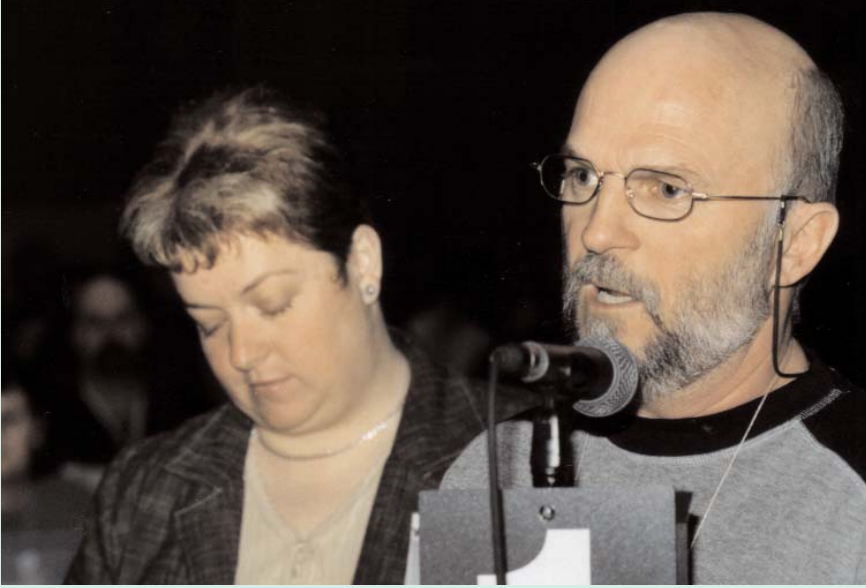
WHERE ARE WE NOW?

- provide for in-service education activities on scheduled work days for each nurse's position to enable nurses to maintain and develop their competencies;
- implement an integrated and structured human resources development plan in all institutions, in addition to the in-service education program, and programs for welcoming, orientation, adaptation, evaluation and planning of training requirements, motivation and fulfilment;
- put in place all possible means of prevention to stop any form of violence in the work environment;
- make a day, evening and night child care service available 7 days a week to facilitate nurses' availability for these unusual shifts.

The next round of negotiations will not necessarily be easy because it will occur in a context in which the sociopolitical stakes are greatly influenced by privatization, deregulation and government disengagement.

In this sense, the innovative nature of the demands will require sustained involvement and mobilization. Every effort must be made to convince the employers and the government that nurses want living and working conditions conducive to a rewarding and empowering career. We all want a work environment in which our collective and individual rights as nurses are recognized and respected, and where we will not be hesitant to invite our daughters and sons to pursue a career.

Jennie Skene,
President



a dire necessity and requires employers to have a comprehensive vision and rigorous planning.

Five additional days of in-service education per year within the work days scheduled for the position, for all nurses holding full-time or part-time positions, would better equip them to meet constantly changing needs and expectations.

The development, implementation and monitoring of educational needs and activities should be guaranteed by a formal, structured and integrated human resources development plan. It also requires the creation of a local parity committee in all health-care institutions. It is time that continuing education and welcoming, orientation, motivation and empowerment programs again enable nurses to maintain their competencies, promote their professional advancement, progress and deal with new challenges.

Finally, in the current context, greater access to positions, through recognition of experience and expertise when positions are awarded, must certainly be one of the priorities defended by the FIIQ. Professional advancement and increased career opportunities are also key factors in nursing workforce planning. This issue will be analyzed through a thorough study of nursing job classifications, requirements giving access to various job titles and the appropriateness of nursing duties to the academic qualifications acquired. These questions will then be discussed and debated in greater depth this fall, first by the delegates, then by the members, once the work of the Joint Committee on Nursing Job Classifications is completed.

Better integrated prevention of violence in the work environment ...

...This will enable all nurses to work in dignity in a violence-free environment. The impact of violence on nurses' health is too great, and every effort must be made to prevent or stop it. Effective prevention of violence will take shape by implementing a prevention program in every institution, with the purpose of ensuring the security of staff and premises and educating resources in the work environment. A joint process for analyzing and handling complaints about violence should

be introduced in the collective agreement and a policy should be implemented to counter violence in the work environment. These measures should make it possible to put an end to the earliest manifestations of violence and ensure a healthier work environment.

Accelerated settlement of grievances ...

...This could be achieved by simplifying and facilitating the arbitrator appointment process and grievance hearings. A fast-track arbitration process for disputes with less impact could also be introduced. This would certainly be positive for the members concerned. The excessively long delays between the time a grievance is filed and settled cause the climate in the workplace to deteriorate. They also often mean that wronged employees temporarily lose their rights under collective agreement.

The introduction of medical arbitration for disability disputes would dejudicialize the process for resolving this type of disagreement. It would also give nurses on disability better protection if the employer contests their rights.

Easier access to child care in the work environment ...

...This would help to bridge work and family life. It would also increase the number of nurses declaring their availability for less attractive shifts such as evening, nights and weekends. Because it is impossible for some nurses to respond to requests to work on these shifts, a form of casualization is perpetuated. Not only in their own interest, but in the interest of a health-care system faced with a nursing shortage, nurses who encounter difficulties reconciling their roles as parents and workers should have access to assistance that is more in line with their needs.

In conclusion ...

...These six priorities are the cornerstone of the nurses' collective agreement. Their sole objective is to provide working conditions that will not only ensure that there are enough nurses, but that they will be healthy and motivated to deliver quality care to a population that increasingly needs it.

* For more information, see FIIQ en Action, Volume 15, Number 3, November 2002, or visit the FIIQ Web site: www.fiiq.qc.ca.

A crucial change of course for nurses

A daring approach

It is first important to specify that each recommendation adopted by the delegates upholds guiding principles for the restructuring of work time and stabilization of positions proposed by the Executive Committee. Several recommendations were even adopted unanimously. The delegates made two amendments to the priority recommendations on restructuring of work time and stabilization of positions. One amendment would maintain

The Executive Committee originally submitted 62 recommendations for debate, focusing on the six priorities of the preliminary draft collective agreement. At the Special Federal Council in March, all of these recommendations were adopted, most of them in their initial form. The suggested solutions are directly connected to the realities of nursing and undeniably correspond to the needs of the vast majority of nurses.

payment of the evening and night shift premiums in addition to additional weekly days off. The other would add conditions for the time when these additional days off are taken.

Other proposals were added to the demands already included in the preliminary draft. Less directly related to the priority demands but still referring to the same subject, they seek pay-

ment at double time for overtime worked on weekends and the addition of a sixth week of annual vacation after 25 years of service.

Regarding the human resources development plan, the delegates added new demands to the recommendations proposed by the Executive Committee. They concern the deadline for establishing the local parity committee on human resources development, the amounts allocated to the motivation and empowerment program and the conditions for planning training activities for employees on the evening and night shifts.



There is a broad consensus on the priorities concerning prevention of violence, accelerated settlement of grievances and access to child care in the work environment. Amendments were introduced concerning the creation of a committee to counter violence in the workplace, means of compelling employers to accelerate the process of appointing a grievance arbitrator, and the obligation to meet a deadline for implementation of a child care service in the work environment.

Other demands

The preliminary draft presented to the December Federal Council delegates and to the local general meetings in January included a second set of demands. These 44 demands were more general in nature and not directly related to the priorities. They concerned harmonization of the collective agreement with various legislation (Act respecting labour standards, Act introducing the civil union, etc.) and the resolution of some problems currently encountered in applying the collective agreement. Although some of them were clarified or broadened by the adoption of amendments, all these demands were adopted and will be part of the draft collective agreement. In general, the purpose of these amendments is to expand certain parental rights, add social leave or recognize the special reality of employees working with patients with cognitive disorders.

New proposals

The delegates also added new proposals adopted by the local general meetings to the preliminary draft collective agreement. These demands are mainly intended to:

- facilitate union activities and improve service to members:
 - by expanding access to leave for union activities, for example.
- improve the organization of work:
 - by eliminating incomplete shifts and obliging employers to replace absences, for example.
- better reconcile family or personal life and professional life:
 - by guaranteeing, in particular, a nurse's right to work all of her work days consecutively when she is working nights;
 - by offering more latitude for taking compensatory leave (statutory holidays), annual vacation, 4 weeks of leave without pay or sick leave for personal reasons.

- provide adequate compensation for inconvenience:
 - by making changes, if applicable, to the payment of evening and night shift premiums when the employee does not do all her work on these shifts; by increasing the on-call premium; by granting a \$50 premium per shift when a nurse agrees to work an additional weekend; and by introducing substantial improvements to the benefits and isolation premiums for nurses working in remote regions.
- specify certain rules concerning special measures and job security:
 - by instituting a 50 kilometre radius for bumping or relocation with the same employer and the right to an orientation or training period in the event of bumping.
- favour annual vacations:
 - by expanding the right to annual vacation during the rehabilitation period (gradual return).
- Improve the conditions of the salary insurance plan:
 - by adding the amount of certain premiums in the calculation of a part-time employee's salary insurance benefit;
 - by increasing the annual number of sick-leave days to 12.
- expand the employer contribution to certain employment-related expenses:
 - by ensuring that all nurses required to use their personal car for their trips can benefit from free parking; by annually adjusting the mileage allowance; and by indexing this amount to the automobile CPI, for example.
- Demands of a more general nature concerning:
 - the conditions for beginning service in a position; salary payment periods; the possibility of obtaining a leave without pay to participate in humanitarian assistance; and the possibility of obtaining a partial leave without pay to teach.

All these demands will be reflected in the nurses' draft collective agreement. They will be presented and defended at the bargaining table by the negotiating team. As already mentioned, the consultations on salaries, retirement and job classification will be held in the fall. We will see each other again at that time! The Federal Council will follow up in June and you will be informed of its decisions through *FIIQ en Action*. Stay tuned...

A FRUITFUL CONSULTATION

This past January, nurses from all institutions affiliated to the FIIQ participated in local general meetings to debate the recommendations for the preliminary draft collective agreement, vote on the priority recommendations and introduce new proposals. More than 1000 new proposals were received and compiled after this consultation. Three hundred and twenty-two institutions sent their consultation booklet to the FIIQ. This indicates that a very large proportion of nurses had the opportunity to take an active part in this first step of the process of drafting the 2003 collective agreement. Let's hope that just as many nurses will be involved in the next round of consultations scheduled for the fall!



FIIQ EN ACTION

VOLUME 16, NUMBER 1 •
MARCH 2003

This journal is published by the
Communication-Information
Service.

Web site : www.fiiq.qc.ca

e-mail: info@fiiq.qc.ca

Published after each FIIQ Federal
Council and Convention meeting,
this journal has a distribution of
45,500 copies. Reprint of any article
or excerpt must indicate "Reprint
from the publication *FIIQ en
Action*."

ISSN 1182-3216