

Shaking up the house

COLLECTIVE ACTION LEADS TO PROGRESSIVE CHANGE AT PBC



BURNABY | CUPE 1816 President Beth Miller doesn't hesitate when asked to identify the tipping point that signalled it was time for a new board of directors at Pacific Blue Cross.

"It came after several months of failed bargaining, the employer's refusal to take concessions off the table, and a resounding strike vote by our members," she recalls.

"After doing nothing to help prevent the first job action in company history, then saying nothing when PBC locked us out, the board sent us an e-mail expressing their unqualified support for the employer's position. That was the point of no return."

When a collective agreement was reached in September, finally ending the 66-day lockout, many thought that CUPE 1816's victory at the bargaining table—four years of wage increases, no concessions, and preservation of retiree benefits the company was trying to claw back—was a fitting end to the dispute. Instead, it was only the beginning of a more critical fight: a struggle for the heart of Pacific Blue Cross that would culminate with the election of seven progressive new board members at the non-profit benefit provider's December 13 annual general meeting.

Accountability at issue

Shortly after the lockout began in early July, Pacific Blue Cross President and CEO Jan Grude announced that PBC's scheduled September 7 AGM had been cancelled indefinitely, citing the uncertainty caused by the labour dispute. CUPE challenged the move at BC Supreme Court, arguing that cancelling the meeting

violated the BC Societies Act by exceeding the 15-month limit between AGMs.

Meanwhile, few were fooled by Grude's explanation. Miller says that Pacific Blue Cross had cancelled the September 7 meeting only a day after receiving a special resolution calling for the removal of seven directors from the board. CUPE BC Secretary-Treasurer Trevor Davies, who questioned the board's behaviour in his Fall column for *Public Employee*, was similarly unimpressed.

"We saw this as a desperate move by the CEO to prevent the board from having to face accountability," recalls Davies. "That was a clear signal that this board had lost its way. It was especially alarming to us that the labour members of the board had abandoned any sense of vision for steering the future direction of this organization. They had become part of the problem."

PBC did not finally schedule the December 13 AGM date until the end of October. By that time, CUPE BC and Local 1816 had already set the wheels in motion for a massive, multi-union campaign to replace the seven board members whose terms were up in 2017. Shortly after officially launching the campaign in November, CUPE announced a slate of candidates committed to advancing a progressive vision for Pacific Blue Cross (see sidebar).

"Bad employers need to be held accountable wherever they emerge, particularly when they demand concessions from working people while purporting to be a progressive company—and the same goes for any board of directors that supports such demands," says CUPE BC President Paul Faoro.

"The board's support for this anti-worker strategy inconvenienced countless plan members and put 600

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workers on the street for two months. That's why CUPE members and their supporters showed up in such strong numbers at PBC's annual general meeting to vote for more progressive voices on that board."

Getting the vote out

Campaign coordinator Nathan Allen led a team of regional office staff and CUPE 1816 members who, in consultation with the BC Federation of Labour, helped recruit slate candidates and get the word out about the AGM, as well as addressing the various logistical, legal, and communications issues surrounding the election process. It was Community Organizer Tina Meadows's job to line up enough buses to transport nearly 800 unionized PBC primary plan holders to the AGM from various pick-up locations in the Lower Mainland.

Two weeks after the official launch, the campaign got a boost on November 15 with the news of Jan Grude's sudden retirement. Undoubtedly another victory for CUPE 1816, the departure of Grude — who was widely criticized for

his confrontational approach and demands for concessions that led to the lockout — by no means guaranteed a brighter future for PBC. The CUPE-led campaign responded by ramping up its social media and communications strategy.

"It was really important to get the message out that Grude's leaving PBC was all the more reason to get out to the AGM and vote," recalls Allen. "This process was all about ensuring that the next leadership group at PBC is progressive."



THAT'S DEDICATION Taking a shuttle bus from Chilliwack, CUPE 411 members (from left) Suzanne Abercrombie, Bonnie Fox, and Brenda Moores arrived at the Westin Bayshore Hotel on December 13 just in time to cast their votes.

MoveUp Vice-President Alicia Gallo, one of the seven candidates running for the board, agrees.

"Pacific Blue Cross needed new leadership that is in step with the B.C. labour movement's values," says Gallo. "Our team had the experience to stand up for the millions of workers and their families that depend on PBC's extended health coverage."

With that mission accomplished — all seven candidates were elected on December 13 — CUPE 1816 members can finally rest assured that the future is much brighter than when its last round of bargaining began.

BUILDING A BETTER PBC

THE SEVEN INDIVIDUALS who ran on the labour-endorsed slate of candidates for the Pacific Blue Cross board of directors all have impressive backgrounds in community involvement, labour activism or knowledge of health and pension benefits.

All elected, the new PBC board members are: MoveUp Vice President Alicia Gallo, BC Federation of Labour Secretary-Treasurer Aaron Ekman, Royal Columbia Hospital emergency room physician Dr. Sandra Jenneson, St. Paul's Hospital general internal medicine specialist Dr. Stéphane Voyer, Hospital Employees' Union pensions and benefits director Brendan Dick, UNIFOR Local 2200 President Joe Elworthy, and past B.C. Teachers' Federation President Jim Iker.

Early in the campaign, the slate issued a policy platform aimed at returning PBC to its roots as a progressive, non-profit extended health benefits provider that respects both workers and plan holders.

With the platform, the candidates pledged their commitment to:

- Value employees that work every day on behalf of plan holders and their families.
- Make sure new executive leadership is installed that improves labour/management culture and restores PBC's status as a good employer.
- Work with unions and community organizations to deliver high quality service to workers who depend on PBC coverage.
- Bring transparent leadership that makes sure beneficiaries have a voice in the future of PBC.
- Re-establish a relationship with community and labour partners to attract new clients and encourage others to come back to PBC.
- Restore the Service Delivery Contracts to the high levels that clients expect and deserve.
- Propose innovative concepts and ideas to grow the organization and protect plan holders.
- Perform the fiduciary duties of the director's role in a fair, efficient, and prudent manner.