

The struggle for a Collective Agreement

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It is no secret that collective bargaining negotiations with some major employers have been taking many months' even years to reach completion. The UNW's main goal is to always negotiate on behalf of our members to ensure that they receive a fair deal, however long that may take. In some cases depending on the employers willingness to work with the Union this may take a significant amount of time.

Last week, we were proud to reach a tentative agreement with Dominion Diamonds to save 150 union jobs from being contracted out. The new agreement provides members of Local 3050 diamond workers at Ekati Mine job security for the entire bargaining unit, and makes changes to the leave programs that will benefit both the members and the Employer. This agreement will also extend the life of the collective agreement to May 31, 2022 which will provide stability for our members.

Even though we were successful in negotiating this agreement in a short timeframe the UNW is still at a cross roads with current negotiations with both the GNWT and NTPC, although mediation is scheduled to take place in the early fall with both employers. It has taken many months (years) to reach this point.

Although we refer to "employers" plural, let's be real – we all know it is the all the GNWT – the Cabinet...or is it? This includes Hay River Health and Social Services, whom we are still in bargaining with, but it appears that their path has been set.

Often, unions are depicted in the media as political, self-serving bodies and are solely blamed when collective agreements cannot be reached quickly. However, the employer themselves must be willing and actually interested in bargaining with the union in order to reach an agreement conducive to all parties. If one party comes to the bargaining table with uncompromising, preconceived proposals and rejects almost everything the opposing side proposes, an agreement can take much longer to complete.

The failure of the employer to recognize the value of public servants and to come to the table with a mandate that would provide a framework for a settlement is extremely disappointing. Due to their failure, the UNW conducted strike votes in 2017 for both bargaining units, where our members voted in favour of strike action.

If union members are forced as a last resort to strike after a vote, this can be particularly costly to all parties involved including the employer, the union and individual workers. This can mean that those unionized workers who you count on to deliver essential services- whether it be through the government or in utilities or in education, or health care- are off the job until a settlement is reached or the GNWT legislatures workers back to the job. Due to the financial and social disruption strikes cause, (not to mention emotional tolls they can have on communities) strikes are always the last resort used to complete a collective agreement.

The last thing the UNW wants is to strike. In order for this to be avoided I cannot stress enough- the importance of a *mutual* nature of reaching an agreement. This means using negotiation, compromise and trust in bargaining sessions to get the best deal possible for workers.

The UNW, through intense discussions with the employers, have agreed to seek outside mediation to help negotiate a new collective agreement. Mediation dates have been set and are scheduled to take place October 25 to 27, 2018 in Yellowknife for the GNWT and November 14, 2018 through to November 16, 2018 in Yellowknife for the NTPC.

Whether a final collective agreement is “good” in comparison to previous deals largely depends on the employer and the union working cooperatively through the process. The UNW will continue to fight for job security and protecting full time indeterminate jobs from being turned into relief positions.