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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

HEALTH CARE PROVIDER UNIONS DENOUNCE PREMIER SCOTT MOE'S MOVE TO EXTEND EMERGENCY ORDER

The Saskatchewan government's extension of the provincial emergency order demonstrates how deeply out of touch they are with the reality facing health care workers, according to CUPE 5430, SEIU-West and SGEU who represent Saskatchewan health care providers around the province.

"It's hypocritical for the government to extend an emergency order at the same time as it is lifting all other public safety measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic," said Tanya Schmidt, Acting Chair, SGEU Health Providers Bargaining Committee. "It's unbelievable that the premier continues to ignore the plight of health care workers by doing nothing to help protect them or those they care for in the health care system. This is especially concerning given recently released data that shows there have been 99 deaths in the first three weeks of February alone and hospitalizations due to COVID are at record levels – which clearly shows there is still a crisis in Saskatchewan."

In April of 2020, five health care unions in the province reached an agreement with the SHA that provided options to address the staffing needs created by COVID. This involved cohorting workers in long term care homes and determining service slowdowns that created a labour pool of workers who could be redeployed to deal with pandemic-related health priorities, including testing and assessment, contact tracing, case management or increased acute care. It allowed for shifts to be offered to staff across former health regions to deal with COVID outbreaks and emergency staff shortages. Finally, it allowed for the use of a supplemental workforce to assist existing staff. This agreement expired in the summer of 2021 and workers returned to their previous positions after the provincial government lifted the state of emergency.

Late summer and fall of 2021 saw the fourth wave of COVID once again impacting the province's health care system. CUPE 5430, SEIU-West and SGEU entered into negotiations with the SHA to discuss options to address the situation. Talks were halted very suddenly when the Sask Party government announced it had passed an emergency order in September which included unilaterally imposing an extension to the expired agreement for health care providers..

"At the heart of the health care system's response to COVID for the last two years has been frontline health care workers. These workers are exhausted mentally and physically. Many have had no vacation time and continue working short staffed or face significant overtime to ensure shifts are covered and high-quality care is provided to patients, clients and residents," said Bashir Jalloh, President of CUPE 5430. "These are the same health care workers that Premier Moe is now mistreating with his heavy-handed extension of this emergency order."

This week, a statement from the premier's office said the emergency order will be extended indefinitely or until workers within the health care system "no longer need to be redeployed".

"The decision to address the health care staffing shortage by using an emergency order instead of actually recruiting, training and paying staff to come and work in health care is misguided at best and a craven abuse of the state of emergency powers, at worse," said Barbara Cape, President of SEIU-West. "We're either in a state of emergency or we're not – with the lifting of the public health orders and the Premier's statements about the need to live with COVID, I'm not sure if the Premier knows."

Together, SGEU, SEIU-West and CUPE 5430 represent approximately 30,000 health care providers working in acute care, home care, public health and long-term care across Saskatchewan.

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