

Liberal question 'unscripted' offer to nurses

Premier denies it was a precondition to bargaining

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THE TELEGRAM

Liberal

Leader Yvonne Jones kicked off question period in the House of Assembly Monday by challenging the finance minister on an impromptu offer he made to the province's nurses during his budget speech last Thursday.

"This offer was unscripted, without any warning or advanced notice to the nurses and again shows the disrespect this government has for the collective bargaining process," Jones said.

She said the move was in poor taste and noted it was made just one week before negotiations with nurses were to resume.

Finance Minister Jerome Kennedy was addressing the Greater Corner Brook Board of Trade Monday, so Premier Danny Williams answered questions on his behalf.

(To page No A3)

Sweet deal

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(From page No A1)

Williams told the House the offer to nurses has been sweetened.

But he said if the nurses want to start from scratch when bargaining begins Thursday, they can.

The premier outlined the new offer.

A template negotiated with most public sector unions last year — 21.5 per cent when compounded over four years — is being put back on the table.

In addition, the lowest two steps on the nurses salary scale have been eliminated, bumping junior nurses up.

A new step has also been created at the top of the scale, so experienced nurses now have a higher ceiling to reach for.

Addressing issues

Williams said the changes to the salary scale address both recruitment and retention issues.

He also said the government will address standby fees and shift differentials with the union.

The Liberals also brought up a number of other health-care issues during question period Monday, including the lack of a permanent infectious disease specialist for the province, a dire lack of urologists and anesthetists and the fact that patients who need to travel within, or outside the province for medical treatments need to be better compensated.

Outside the House, Williams told reporters he was "blown away" by the union's reaction.

"For the union to say that they were blindsided, the term blindsided comes when there's a negative outcome," he said. "From our perspective, we actually put \$16 million, round figures, more on the table."

Williams said the new offer will make nurses the highest or second highest paid, east of Ontario.

He also denied the offer was a precondition to bargaining.

But Williams suggested nurses may strike no matter what is offered.

The union recently got overwhelming support from its membership in a strike vote.

"If they want to strike, we can't stop that," Williams said.

The premier also said that every time the government has tried to sweeten the pot in the past, the union has turned around and piled on more demands.

"Every time we step up and we answer a concern, they step up again and they have a new concern. We can't play that chase game, we just can't do it," he said.



Danny Williams

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