

Locally, SUN is a member of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour and nationally, it is a member of the Canadian Labour Congress through the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions. The maturity of the organization is a mark of how much individual nurses in the province have grown in their sense of direction, ability, self worth and collective unity. In only a few years, nurses have created an effective organization. This exciting environment provides a great many opportunities for nurses' participation, now and in the future.

Activity at the local level is of utmost importance to all nurses. This is where all the collective agreements must be monitored and enforced. It is the place where the individual needs of nurses can be discovered and met.

SUN District Councils allow for communication between locals in specific geographic areas. Local SUN District Council Representatives are provincially funded to attend provincial conferences that settle the major bargaining and policy questions. Each SUN region elects a representative to sit on the provincial board of directors, which is responsible for carrying out the mandates agreed upon at provincial conferences. SUN members have access to educational programs, which help them understand how to read, apply, and enforce their collective agreement, and other labour legislation in their workplace for the protection of their fellow nurses and for the good of their patients/clients.

Your Place in History

As a member of SUN — whether you are one of the founders or a new member today — you are part of the union's continuing story. You benefit from every gain won by nurses in past years. Your commitment and participation contribute to what SUN can achieve in the years ahead.

To know your past is to understand those things that will make us even stronger in the future.

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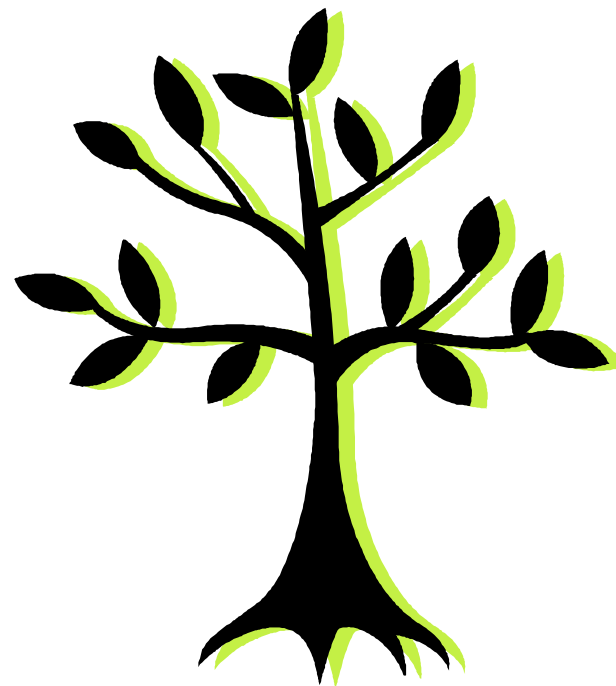
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Healthy Members, Healthy Union, Healthy Communities

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Roots of the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses

To understand what SUN is doing today, and what we are capable of doing tomorrow, it is necessary for us to understand where we came from, the obstacles we've overcome, and the political, economic and nursing issues that have shaped our expectations.

Everything about the Saskatchewan Union of Nurses has a sense of immediacy. For example, issues may come up regarding contracts defining wages and benefits, workplace issues, critical problems in health care, nursing practice, health care reform, retention of experienced nurses and the recruitment of new nurses.

In the mid 1970s a body of nurses came together in a hothouse atmosphere that demanded they prove they were able to function as working professionals and as a united work force.

The Stage is Set

In the late '50s and early '60s hospital service workers began to organize into unions to bargain for better wages and working conditions. Their rising standards came closer and closer to that of nurses. Nurses began to see they were falling behind, and realized that low wages, long hours and inequities in the workplace did not have to exist. Collective action could improve the workplace environment, thus enabling nurses to concentrate on serving the sick.

In 1966, the nurses' professional licensing body – the Saskatchewan Registered Nurses' Association – started the process of negotiating contracts for its members. Local staff nurse associations were formed at hospitals. The SRNA provincial body bargained a "model" contract with Saskatchewan Healthcare Association and then each staff local signed a version of that model with their own hospital management.

Negotiations began in 1968, and would successfully produce annual contracts for the next five years. This system had two flaws that would prevent nurses from reaching their full potential.

The first problem was with management. Negotiations depended on the willingness of hospital management to participate. There was no legal requirement for management to bargain, and no source of power for nurses when negotiations reached a stalemate. The second problem was with other unions. These established unions representing other health care workers were understandably worried that the SRNA could bargain (sometimes setting the trend for settlements), but was powerless to enforce good settlements. The SRNA was not legally constituted as a trade union and included nurses who, by virtue of their supervisory role as Directors of Nursing, might be more likely to represent the ideas of management. While the SRNA attempted to have all its staff locals certified as unions by the Labour Relations Board, other unions argued that such certification would sanction a management dominated union.

The issue came to a head in a legal challenge in 1973. A dispute between the SRNA and another union went to the Labour Relations Board, then the Saskatchewan Court of Appeal, and finally the Supreme Court of Canada. The final ruling: SRNA could not be certified as a trade union. With that decision, nurses' legal and moral base for carrying on contract negotiations crumbled. The SRNA was forced to withdraw from the industrial relations field.

Meeting the Challenge

This news came in the middle of preparations for another round of bargaining. It was a shock to the 2,500 nurses who by now had come to appreciate the collective bargaining process. But it was a shock that

compelled the nurses to act. Instead of disbanding, the nurses involved in the bargaining process began planning a separate, new union ... an organization that could meet the requirements for full trade union status (thus providing the maximum bargaining rights and power for its members), and one that would also be independent from the SRNA so the professional body would not be jeopardized.

Within a few months of the Supreme Court decision, plans had been laid, province-wide meetings held, a constitution drawn up, officers elected and a brand new, fully certified union was formed in January 1974 – The Saskatchewan Union of Nurses. Now it remained for these nurses to prove they could operate effectively as an independent trade union.

Exercising Strength

The new union's chance to prove itself came almost immediately. Its first round of negotiations (in 1974, the same year SUN was created) took the union all the way through conciliation and strike action before a settlement was reached.

SUN proved it could operate with vigor and effectiveness, by winning a respectable contract in a very tough situation, but more importantly, people inside and outside the union learned that nurses would stand and fight together for the important issues they believed in.

This spirit of unity – and the refusal to back away from difficult problems – has become a SUN trademark. Contract negotiations over the years have sometimes been quiet, sometimes tough and volatile, but always highlighted by a sense of commitment on the part of SUN members. It is this attitude that has helped members win major advances regarding issues of salary and responsibility pay, hours of work and days off, nursing practice, and a wide variety of benefits.

Nurses may have once been viewed as followers of trends in labour relations, but today, they have become pace-setters — with a union that represents the largest single group of health care workers in the province.

Today and Tomorrow

SUN has grown from about 2,500 members to more than 7,700. From a single office employee to over 35 staff members. From a basement workroom to our own office building in Regina and a branch office in Saskatoon. From a group of 40 locals to almost 310. From an unknown entity in the labour relations scene to one of Saskatchewan's most prominent unions.