

## **What can be achieved with campaigns and unions working together**

### ***A letter from Ontario Health Coalition Director Natalie Mehra to the first AGM of Health Campaigns Together.***

The Ontario Health Coalition now represents well over 1/2 million people and more than 400 member organizations. All the health care unions are involved and supporting, as are the federations of labour, along with all of the major patient/advocacy/seniors' organizations. We have more than 50 active local chapters.

In the last two years we have totally stopped all closures of local hospitals and emergency departments. We held a referendum on the hospital cuts and garnered more than 100,000 votes. (In our province, that is massive.) This campaign succeeded in stopping the hospital cuts. We saved birthing units across the province in small and rural hospitals from closure -- most recently in Leamington and Brockville.

We also stopped an attempt by the government to cut diagnostics -- MRIs, CTs, colonoscopies and endoscopies -- and day surgeries from public hospitals and contract them out to private clinics. We held a referendum on this as well, and we garnered more than 115,000 votes. Again, we succeeded in totally stopping the privatization of public hospital services. So, to date, we have stopped two-tiered health care and private ownership of public hospital services.

We have won 5% funding increases each year for home care, and we have improved staffing levels in long-term care. We also won legislative amendments to force public access to information about quality of care in public hospitals. (In fact, we have won amendments in the public interest to every single piece of health legislation that has been introduced over the last two decades.)

We continue to have rolled back the privatization in the P3 hospitals, such that all services are excluded from the deals with the exception of the hard shell maintenance. We met with the provincial auditor general and were able to get an amazing audit of the P3s to date, showing, in her words, that they have wasted \$8 billion unnecessarily. We are moving forward with a P3 campaign leading into the next election. We are also fighting mega-mergers of public hospitals.

Sadly, our success is not mirrored in the rest of the public sector where there is not such an organized fight-back. Our province continues to have the most aggressive austerity fiscal approach in the country and they are privatizing public services at an unprecedented rate. Most recently, they began selling off public hydro. This is deeply unpopular, not in the least because hydro rates have skyrocketed, and the government is scrambling. It now ranks at 11% popularity in the polls -- the lowest in history.

But we have protected health care, mainly through the use of mass campaigns, referenda, and bringing thousands of people from local communities into the Legislature in Toronto every time major hospital cuts are threatened in their communities. In next week's budget, the province will announce a 5% increase for public hospitals, we believe. This meets our demand for improved funding.

**We are a year out from a provincial election and all parties (including the Conservatives) are campaigning on stopping the hospital cuts, improved funding and improved public health care. No one dare propose privatization, at least not openly.**

At the national level, I continue to serve on the Board of Directors for the Canadian Health Coalition. We have health coalitions in 8 of the 10 provinces and one of the northern territories. Most of the provincial coalitions have structured themselves following our structure at the Ontario Health Coalition, with local chapters scattered across their provinces.

We have made headway at the national level also. Our federal government has promised to uphold the Canada Health Act and single-tier health care. I have just written another major national report on private clinics violating the Canada Health Act which we will be releasing with the support of the opinion-leading national daily newspaper, who has promised front-page coverage in exchange for an advance exclusive.

We did surveys and found hundreds of patients willing to speak publicly who had been charged for diagnostics and surgeries in private clinics, in violation of our single-tier medicare laws. So we have a host of patients ready to speak out, and I believe we will be successful in rolling back the private clinics in the other provinces.

We will be releasing the report in press conferences across Canada in May. In British Columbia we are fighting a Charter Challenge that will likely go to the Supreme Court, brought by the private clinics who are seeking to bring down the laws protecting single-tier medicare. This is a grave threat and I am embarking on a tour about this in the next few weeks.

Okay, I promised to be brief. There is a lot more!!! But suffice it to say that the struggle goes on and we are holding our own.