

# Medicare makes economic sense

## EDITORIAL

It isn't every day that union leaders and their corporate adversaries agree on major matters of public policy. But when they do, politicians across Canada should heed what they have to say.

Starting from that premise, Brian Payne, president of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union, took his concerns over the state of health care in Canada to the corporate boardrooms of 15 of the largest corporations in Canada companies whose workers his union represents, including Bell Canada, Abitibi-Consolidated, NorskeCanada, Weyerhaeuser Canada, Domtar, Petro Canada and Shell Canada..

His message couldn't have been clearer: Publicly funded health care gives Canadian companies a huge competitive advantage over their competitors in the U.S., where the skyrocketing cost of private health care plans is fast becoming the most important issue at the bargaining table.

For example, U.S. General Electric this year faced its first strike in 20 years over health insurance, which also was the make-or-break issue that led workers to hit the bricks this month at Domtar's plant in Michigan.

Payne didn't have to tell the Canadian CEOs about the cost of private health insurance. In Canada, the bill for workplace-based plans that supplement basic medicare coverage averaged \$1,198 per worker in 2001. At the current rate of increase, the premiums will double in five years' time.

Payne's bottom line was this: To the extent that our publicly funded health care system fails to deliver the services that Canadians demand, to the extent that it is privatized or traded away for short-term tax cuts, Canadian unions will come back to the bargaining table "to fight their Canadian employers for additional medical benefits."

Because he spoke the language of money and soaring costs, a language CEOs had no difficulty understanding, Payne succeeding in convincing many of them to support his efforts to get Ottawa and the provinces to stop downloading and privatization, which don't save money, but merely transfer the costs of health care on to private sector employers and workers in the form of higher insurance premiums and user fees.

So far, three CEOs Bell Canada's Michael Sabia, Abitibi-Consolidated's John Weaver, and NorskeCanada's Russell Horner have joined Payne in writing directly to Prime Minister Jean Chrétien to follow through on all the recommendations in the Romanow report, and in particular the expansion of medicare to include pharmacare and home care.

As one letter put it so eloquently: "Basic health care should be provided to Canadians through publicly funded universal programs, and not transferred to private workplace-based health plans as costs to employers and workers. It is in our collective interest to ensure that health care remains a right of Canadians, rather than becoming a source of labour relations conflict."

What these thoughtful letters demonstrate is that progressive social policy and sound economic policy are not necessarily at odds, as too many of our politicians, right-wing pundits and think tanks in Canada would have us believe. In the case of health care, good social and economic policies are, in fact, one and the same.