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VANOC edict behind repressive legislation

VICTORIA - A memo from VANOC to the provincial ambulance service appears to be behind the government's move to legislate B.C.'s 3,500 striking ambulance paramedics "back to work" in the middle of collective bargaining.

Health Services Minister Kevin Falcon has repeatedly denied that the Olympics ordered his government's attack on collective bargaining rights. He introduced Bill 21 yesterday in the House to impose a contract on the paramedics that will last until after the 2010 Games. He claims the move is only to relieve tired ambulance service managers and to address the H1N1 pandemic.

But in September, a memorandum was sent from VANOC director of medical services Dr. Mike Wilkinson to Ambulance Service CEO Lee Doney and other government officials. In part that memo states:

"VANOC Medical Services (and thus the IOC) requires definitive confirmation by Oct 1, 2009 that all required ambulance services will be provided as planned. These services include the ability to engage the VPCs and BCAS members in full venue planning as soon as possible. This confirmation must also include a guarantee that no services during the Games will be disrupted or reduced from what has been planned."

"If we are unable to obtain that guarantee (through either settlement of the strike or legislated "detente" for the Games), then VANOC will be required to initiate alternative contingency plans to avoid cancellation of the Games."

CUPE BC president Barry O'Neill says "it seems obvious to me that this memo is at the heart of the provincial government's shameful disregard for our ambulance paramedics."

The Ambulance Services Collective Agreement Act introduced by Falcon yesterday is a first in Canadian labour history. It marks the first time a government has forced public employees to accept a collective agreement while the union is in the middle of voting on an offer from that same government.

"The people of B.C. have the right to know the truth from their health minister especially when workers' rights are being trampled," says O'Neill. "To blame the H1N1 pandemic when the ambulance paramedics have been calling on the government to address this health crisis for more than a year is despicable."

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