

OPSEU members stage one-day protest

The North Bay Nugget

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Byline: Gord Young

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Illustration: Colour Photo: Denis Dubois, The Nugget / Ontario Public Service Employees Union members hold an information picket Thursday outside North Bay General Hospital's Scollard site.

About 70 diagnostic, therapeutic and rehabilitative workers bundled in winter clothing and braved temperatures of about -30 C Thursday to march outside North Bay General Hospital.

The 70 were among thousands who risked hefty fines in taking to cold streets across Ontario to demand higher pay and better working conditions.

The workers, whose contract expired 10 months ago, say serious staff shortages and overwork have created a hospital crisis that is putting patients at risk.

The one-day walkout, or "day of action," was deemed illegal earlier in the week by the Ontario Labour Relations Board.

Workers taking part in the illegal walkout could be disciplined or prosecuted and fined as much as \$2,000 per day. The union could face fines of up to \$20,000 per day as a result of successful prosecution.

"We want one central contract for all 40 hospitals," OPSEU Local 662 president Peggy Burke said. "The OHA (Ontario Hospital Association) wants to deal with each hospital separately, which would mean shortages and wage differences."

Burke stressed better wages are needed to attract staff because up to 30 per cent of hospital lab technologists are expected to retire by 2006.

"We're important members of the health-care team," she said.

North Bay General Hospital, Burke said, was left Thursday with the equivalent of its weekend staff.

Hospital spokeswoman Pat Stevens said a "good working relationship" with the union allowed administration to prepare for the shortage.

Elective surgeries remained on schedule, while elective out-patient appointments such as X-rays and CT scans were postponed, she said.

Hospital president Mark Hurst said there were no problems reported by people either entering or leaving the hospital.

"It's a provincial issue," he said. "I hope we can get the problem resolved soon."

Ontario Public Service Employees Union president Leah Casselman said the Ontario Hospital Association didn't leave OPSEU much choice.

"The OHA is totally dysfunctional . . . They need to be listening to you. They need to be listening to their hospitals," she said.

"There is a crisis now. It is going to get worse until they deal with it."

Ontario NDP Leader Howard Hampton urged the hospital association to return to the bargaining table.

"Let's get a contract that recognizes the loyalty of your work, the quality of your work and the importance of your work to Ontario hospitals," Hampton told union members in Toronto.

"(They're) treating the highly qualified workers who operate the equipment as if they don't matter."

Premier Ernie Eves said he was "disappointed" workers chose to carry through with their illegal strike.

"I don't think it's appropriate that anybody defies the law," he said.

The workers are looking for a 23 per cent raise over two years -- about \$50 million more in salaries.

ONTARIO - HOSPITAL WORKERS STAGE A ONE-DAY WALKOUT

CBC Radio Transcripts

Thu 13 Feb 2003

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Guest: GEOFF ELLWAND, Reporter, HILARY SHORT, Ontario Hospital Association

JUDY MADDREN: A one day walkout by workers at 40 hospitals in Ontario this morning means patients across the province are wondering about their scheduled appointments. Medical laboratory technologists, therapists and other hospital professionals are members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union. OPSEU is staging pickets at various hospitals across the province to support contract demands. CBC reporter Geoff Ellwand is outside one hospital in downtown Toronto and joins me now. Geoff, this..., the Ontario Labour Board ruled this week that this protest would be illegal. What's the situation?

GEOFF ELLWAND (Reporter): Well Judy, what the Relations, the Labour Relations Board said was that a walkout would be illegal. What the union has done is permitting minimum staffing levels so people could go into the labs and the places where these people work, but its set-up quite strong informational picket lines here in the heart of hospital district in Toronto. What does that mean for patients? Well, a little while ago I was chatting with Hilary Short from the Ontario Hospital Association.

HILARY SHORT (Ontario Hospital Association): Each hospital has prepared a contingency plan. It will differ from hospital to hospital. The public should not be concerned because emergency essential services will be maintained. In some hospitals, scheduled MRI tests or other tests may have been rescheduled and most people who have..., who will be affected already know that because the hospitals have already notified patients.

ELLWAND: So clearly there's going to be a degree of disruption, a degree of delay, but services will be available to people who need them.

MADDREN: Thanks Geoff. CBC Reporter, Geoff Ellwand in Toronto.

OPSEU members picket illegally: 70 workers join day of action in Chatham, Wallaceburg

The Chatham Daily News
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Byline: Yvonne Bendo
Source: The Daily News
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Illustration: Color Photo: Diana Martin, The Chatham Daily News / DAY OF ACTION: Despite bone chilling temperatures, Steve Nield, right, OPSEU's acting staff representative for the Chatham office, and others in the diagnostic, therapeutic and rehabilitative services at the Public General campus walk the line in front of the hospital during a "day of action" Thursday.

Braving sub-zero temperatures and chilling winds, some health care workers at the Chatham-Kent Health Alliance hit the streets Thursday.

About 50 workers in Chatham and another 20 in Wallaceburg joined their Ontario Public Service Employees Union colleagues at 40 hospitals across the province in a "day of action." Hospital professionals in diagnostic, therapeutic and rehabilitative services walked out -- leaving only enough staff working in the hospitals to cover urgent cases -- despite the fact it was ruled an "unlawful strike" by the Ontario Labour Relations Board.

"It's taken a lot of soul searching and courage for them to come out and do something like this because it is quite an action," said Fran O'Keefe, president of OPSEU local 149, representing some of the local hospital workers.

"It reflects their dedication and their passion . . . that they can be out here is an amazing thing," she said, adding it's a precedent-setting move at the alliance.

The workers are looking for a 23-per-cent wage hike over two years, which would cost \$50 million annually.

The Ontario Hospital Association negotiates on behalf of 40 hospitals, including the alliance. The last collective agreement expired 10 months ago. The OHA and OPSEU are proceeding to arbitration with six hospitals.

But OPSEU wants all 40 hospitals to go to arbitration. Earlier this week, it offered to cancel the day of action if the OHA agreed to do just that.

"The hope behind the day is to send that message, loud and clear, to the OHA that people are frustrated and they're not putting up with it anymore," said Steve Nield, OPSEU's acting staff representative for the Chatham office.

"This whole issue goes beyond just the money issue . . . They've departed from the norm on how central bargaining should be approached."

Nield admits there could be some ramifications from the walkout.

"Discipline is a very real possibility and the employer has been threatening it all along," he said.

Workers taking part in the illegal walkout could be disciplined or prosecuted and fined as much as \$2,000 per day. The union could also face fines of up to \$20,000 per day as a result of successful prosecution under the labour board ruling.

"If they do proceed with discipline, it would have to be fair and consistent," he said. He noted with shortages in many of these health care professions, suspensions would result in future scheduling problems.

If disciplinary actions result, Nield said, "we will defend our members vigorously."

Despite threats of disciplinary actions, some of the approximate 200 local OPSEU members chose to hit the streets.

"If this is something that we need to do in order to get the recognition that we need, then we have to be out here today," said a well-bundled Donna Neefs.

"We're just frustrated that the OHA is not taking any notice of the contract. They will not negotiate," said the respiratory therapist.

Neefs has worked at the alliance for 18 years and said working conditions have never been worse than they are today.

"The acuity of the patient is 10 times worse. We are short staffed. We hear a lot of press about the shortage of doctors and nurses, but there are other health professionals that are in the same boat."

Neefs is not alone.

"Everyone is overworked . . . We've been understaffed for years," said Adrian Smit, an X-ray technologist.

He added awareness of the shortages and the need for more students to seek these types of professions as a career is another reason for the walkout.

But he said the money also has to be there to ensure this happens.

"We're trying to get our wages up to where they should be. We used to have parity with nurses a long time ago," said Smit, adding nurses make 23-per-cent more than other health professionals.

He said the alliance has lost many health professionals to other hospitals and the United States, where they're paid more money.

Nield said the OHA has stated it doesn't have the money for the increased wages.

If "the money isn't there to resolve this dispute, then the government needs to step in," he said. "This is an issue that requires a long-term solution to protect our health care system. Without it, this health care system will fall flat on its face."

The alliance's director of human resources, Rudy Oldewening, said patients dropping in for diagnostic or laboratory tests were turned away Thursday.

The alliance hired a security officer for the Sydenham campus. The two security officers who normally work at Public General kept an eye on demonstrators, Oldewening said. No problems were reported.

He said the alliance would "break even" when the loss of a day's wages for protesters was factored against a loss in billings to the health ministry for the diagnostic procedures.

Oldewening said a teleconference among hospital administrators is scheduled for today to discuss any problems that arose and possible disciplinary actions.

Nield said if the OHA fails to respond to Thursday's actions, then OPSEU members will have to sit down and decide what their next course of action will be.

'Angry' hospital workers walk off job: One-day protest intended to back contract demands

The Sudbury Star
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Illustration: Photo: John Lappa, The Sudbury Star / Hundreds of Local 659 OPSEU members representing laboratory technologists and technicians, respiratory technologists and technicians, pharmacy technicians and dietitians at Sudbury's hospitals held a 12-hour protest outside of Sudbury Regional Hospital's St. Joseph's Health Centre on Thursday. They have been without a contract for more than a year.

Nearly 300 local hospital workers braved Thursday's bitter cold for a one day strike to protest wage disparities and Ontario Hospital Association bargaining practices, but had little effect on hospital operations, despite their anger.

"Most of the people you're seeing here today have never so much as picked up a picket sign," said Jan O'Leary, vice-president of OPSEU Local 659. "But they're so angry and so upset and so tired."

The OPSEU members who participated in the one-day strike are part of the hospital's paramedical group, which includes laboratory technologists and technicians, X-ray technologists, respiratory therapists, pharmacy technicians and dietitians. They've been without a contract for more than a year. Employees from all three Sudbury Regional Hospital sites walked off the job demanding higher wages and to force the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA), which negotiates for 40 Ontario hospitals, back to a central bargaining table.

"The OHA has decided they don't want to participate in that type of bargaining and are going to split us into 40 different arbitration dates," said O'Leary. "We want one contract for all."

OHA communications officer Sandra Conley said some hospitals are scheduled for separate arbitration, but added the OHA isn't necessarily opposed to central bargaining.

"We've gone through central bargaining before," she said. "But to do central bargaining you have to agree on ground rules and we haven't been able to do that. Talks broke down."

When talks resume, O'Leary said money will be a major issue. Salaries for the paramedical group range from about \$30,000 to \$60,000, depending on the job.

"The biggest issue is getting parity with nurses," said O'Leary. "We can't get kids into the program because they look at the disparity in the salaries for the same level of schooling. We're in a critical shortage. If we can't get these kids into programs, we're not going to have the service."

OHA has tried to meet OPSEU's demands, Conley said, but they're asking too much.

"Our offer was very fair and it did address a lot of the concerns OPSEU has," she said. "But they want a 23 per cent increase and hospitals just can't afford that ..."

"As far as we're concerned, nothing has changed because of this day of protest."

But that didn't deter protesters. O'Leary said 150 were picketing at any given time.

"We've left essential services in all three hospitals and we have people on call, so if anything happens we're there," said O'Leary.

"We left a Christmas day level of staffing. We're not stopping anybody from entering the hospital. We're trying to make the public aware we're not invisible and without us that hospital can't run."

Despite their determination, Sudbury Regional Hospital communications officer Loretta Bostrom said hospital operations weren't really affected.

"Other than the scheduled procedures we postponed from today, there were no effects," she said. "There were no problems and no delays for patients, visitors or staff entering or exiting the building."

Those dealing with some hard issues appreciated not being hassled.

"They were pretty gracious," said Jamie MacDonald, whose brother is suffering from a lung infection. "They weren't trying to block traffic. They're pretty understanding ... My brother's in ICU, I'm here while they do work on him. I'm hoping for the best, but they called us up and told us to have the family here."

Lorne Trudeau, whose wife was receiving tests in the prenatal ward, also had no trouble getting in.

"They waved and were pretty friendly," said Trudeau. "We honked and said hello. They don't interfere with the normal operation of the hospital."

"I can understand their fight. I understand things are

hard and you have to do what you have to do."

OPSEU boss talks tough in techs' pay dispute

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TORONTO (CP) -- The union representing thousands of laboratory and X-ray technicians, therapists and other medical workers vowed Wednesday to proceed with a scheduled "day of action" at Ontario's 40 hospitals, despite a labour relations board ruling that said a walkout would be illegal.

The president of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union said members would protest stalled contract talks Thursday, barring a last-minute offer with the Ontario Hospital Association over a wage dispute.

"Our members are prepared to take the final action, they've tried everything else to try and get this employer to listen, so the date they set is tomorrow (Thursday)," Leah Casselman told TVO's Studio 2 current affairs program.

"They recognize all of the legal ramifications to that. I certainly do, our union does," she continued.

"At some point you have to take a stand and draw the line in the sand."

Hilary Short of the Ontario Hospital Association said earlier there would be no offer made to OPSEU before Thursday. "We can't negotiate under the threat of illegal job action," said Short.

"We have a decision from the Ontario Labour Relations Board that says the proposed job action is illegal so we are not expecting to see illegal withdrawal of service."

The union threatened job action if the hospital association failed to improve a wage offer by Thursday.

Union members who encourage or take part in an illegal walkout could be punished by hefty fines, disciplinary action or even prosecution.

The workers are looking for a 23 per cent raise over two years -- about \$50 million more in salaries. They earn between \$37,000 and \$50,000 a year, and say they need the steep increase to make up for years of wage freezes.

Defiant hospital workers march: Union members could face \$2,000 fines for 'day of action'

The Standard (St. Catharines - Niagara)
Fri 14 Feb 2003

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Section: Local News

Byline: Peter Downs

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Length: 685 words

Illustration: Photo: Bob Tymczyszyn, The Standard / Hospital workers protest in front of St. Catharines General Hospital Thursday.

Niagara hospital employees braved the extreme cold Thursday to defy a labour board ruling that declared a protest walkout was illegal.

More than 150 Ontario Public Service Employees Union members from the Niagara Health System's eight hospitals marched in the shadow of St. Catharines General Hospital carrying picket signs as part of a provincewide "day of action" mounted by the union.

Many workers in Niagara participated in the protest on their own time, joining the throng of marchers during lunch breaks or outside of scheduled shifts.

But others walked off the job, risking potential disciplinary action and personal fines of up to \$2,000 per day.

"If you believe in what you're doing, you've got to stand up and take a risk," said Jim Cloughley, an addiction counsellor at Port Colborne Hospital's Newport Centre who chose to protest rather than work his full shift.

The NHS was mulling over what to do about employees who skipped work Wednesday, said Barry Lockhart, vice-president of patient care services at St. Catharines General and Niagara-on-the-Lake Hospital.

"We're trying to gather the overall impact for the Niagara Health System," he said.

"No decision's been made as far as the ultimate outcome."

The walkout interfered with patient services in varying degrees at different hospitals, depending on participation levels.

The NHS attempted to minimize the disruption by scaling back outpatient bookings for Thursday.

"In the majority of cases, we were certainly able to cope with the workload. Unfortunately, there were a couple of procedures that did have to be cancelled (at St. Catharines General)," Lockhart said, referring to elective diagnostic procedures such as X-rays and ultrasounds.

OPSEU had called on about 5,000 members across

the province -- including physiotherapists, X-ray technicians and other hospital staff -- to stage a walkout to press for more money and improved working conditions.

But the Ontario Labour Relations Board ruled Wednesday the protest would constitute an illegal strike.

The OPSEU workers, whose contract expired 10 months ago, say serious staff shortages and overwork have created a crisis in the province's hospitals that is putting patients at risk.

They want a 23 per cent wage hike over two years. The last offer was about nine per cent over two years.

OPSEU offered to cancel the job action if the hospitals agreed to central arbitration for the workers. But the Ontario Hospital Association maintained that offer came too late.

Lab technologist Pearl Hasznosy spent three hours carrying a placard in the protest before leaving to work her regular afternoon shift at Welland County General Hospital.

"We're hoping to bring the issue to the public eye because normally people don't know what we do or that we exist," she said.

Hasznosy's co-worker, Natalie Marko, marched along with her on a day off from the lab.

Despite the bitter conditions -- minus 29 degreesC with the wind chill -- Marko said the mood among protesters was buoyant.

"We're cold, but there's a good turnout. I'm impressed," she said. "We'll see what the repercussions are tomorrow."

Al Egan, an addiction counsellor at Newport Centre, maintained centralized arbitration is essential to prevent shortages of hospital workers in areas with lower pay and fewer benefits.

"What's happening is we're not competitive (in Niagara)," he said. "People are starting to take workers out of our system. They're starting to poach."

Although many others in the walkout protected

themselves against the frigid elements with parkas and snowpants, Egan wore no hat and had his coat wide open to show his red OPSEU shirt.

"I'm from the East Coast. Nothing bothers me. This is like springtime in Charlottetown," he said.

Elsewhere, hospital staff walked off the job in London, Cambridge, Guelph, Sudbury, Huntsville, Thunder Bay and other communities.

By Thursday afternoon, there were no reports of any "serious disruptions to patient care" as a result of the job action, said Hilary Short, a spokeswoman for the OHA.

Short said management wouldn't negotiate a wage increase under the pressure of illegal job action.

"I think it's safe to say the hospitals are not in the position to afford anything close to 23 per cent," Short said.

Workers protest contract delay: OPSEU members pushing for quick action to settle dispute

Owen Sound Sun Times
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Byline: Jim Algie
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Illustration: Colour Photo: Willy Waterton, The Sun Times / OPSEU Local union president Jill McIllwraith addresses the noon-hour rally at the Owen Sound hospital.
More than 300 took part in the protest.: Colour Photo: Rita Rudo

Health workers took a noon break at Grey Bruce Health Services' hospital in Owen Sound to protest sluggish, fragmented contract talks they say contribute to staff shortages in area hospitals.

Three busloads of reinforcements from a Canadian Labour Congress training course at the Canadian Auto Workers education centre in Port Elgin bolstered local members of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU).

The union represents 250 pharmacists, physiotherapists and other health professionals employed by the corporation that operates six hospitals in the Owen Sound area.

More than 300 people, many carrying placards and helium-filled balloons, jammed a covered plaza at the main entrance of the Owen Sound hospital for an hour of speeches and songs. It was a demonstration in support of 5,000 medical professionals employed by 40 hospitals in Ontario.

Elsewhere in the province, some OPSEU members walked off the job as part of what had been billed as a Day of Protest over sluggish talks with the Ontario Hospital Association.

Owen Sound hospital officials said the demonstrations locally had little or no effect on operations.

"We had no cancellations," human resources director Terry McMahon said in an interview. "Staffing levels today were normal," he added, praising local union management for what he described as a "professional" event.

The Owen Sound hospital is one of only six involved in arbitration talks set to begin in March. The breakdown of central bargaining and the standard contracts they bring means that rural hospitals will find it hard to attract new employees, local union site president Rita Rudo said in an interview.

The workers, who earn between \$37,000 and \$50,000 a year, have asked for a 23 per cent raise over two years -- about \$50 million to make up for years of wage freezes -- and to retain and attract staff. When bargaining broke off, the hospitals were offering an increase of about nine per cent.

Without higher wages there isn't the incentive for people to commit to the education and training needed to fill hospital vacancies, Rudo said. Although there are shortages within the hospitals of Grey and Bruce counties, particularly in Owen Sound's lab and diagnostic imaging departments, the hiring crunch has hit harder in major centres where hospitals have begun raiding one another for qualified staff, she said.

Local union members conducted their protest by arrangement with hospital officials. Organizers and hospital officials agreed the hospital's main entrance would be a safer place for the event rather than property entrances where traffic would have been an issue, said Rudo, a pharmacy technician.

Because of the addition of about 150 labour activists from Port Elgin, union leaders from across the province participated in the noon hour event.

OPSEU local union president Jill McIllwraith described "a crisis in our health care" and introduced speakers from the tailgate of a truck backed up to the entrance plaza. At one point, Canadian Labour Congress vice-president Barb Byers, a Saskatchewan government employee, counted more than a dozen unions represented in the crowd. The group had come to support OPSEU workers seeking to protect their jobs "not only for yourself and your families but your communities," Byers said.

One Thunder Bay OPSEU member was cheered when she told the crowd her local union had walked out in -42 weather in support of the central bargaining process. Owen Sound workers organized Thursday's protest to avoid interruptions to patient care.

Hospital employees stage walkout: TDH workers join thousands of others in province-wide 'day of action'

The Daily Press (Timmins)

Fri 14 Feb 2003

Page: 3

Section: City

Byline: Debbie Pell

Source: The Daily Press

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Story Type: Business

Length: 783 words

Illustration: Photo: Debbie Pell, The Daily Press / Approximately 70 of the 144 bargaining unit members at Timmins and District Hospital walked off the job Thursday. Laboratory and X-ray technicians, therapists and other medical health professionals faced -38 C temperatures when they walked out of the hospital at 6:45 a.m. in a protest to demand better pay and working conditions. The demonstration ended at 1:30 p.m. with their return to the hospital. Consequences of the illegal walk-out have not yet been determined.; Photo: Gilles Bisson

TIMMINS - Unionized employees at Timmins and District Hospital (TDH) joined thousands across the province in an illegal day of action Thursday.

About 70 laboratory and X-ray technicians, therapists and other medical bargaining unit members of Local 643 walked out of the hospital at 6:45 a.m. in -38 C temperatures to demand better pay and working conditions.

The workers, whose contract expired 10 months ago, say serious staff shortages and overwork have created a hospital crisis that is putting patients at risk.

The one-day walkout, or "day of action," was deemed illegal earlier in the week by the Ontario labour relations board.

While they ended their demonstration at 1:30 p.m., the consequences of their action have not yet been determined.

Hospital management is taking the job action seriously as patient care was interrupted, said Rick Cybulskie, director of human resources for the hospital. Procedures had to be cancelled and some patients were unable to attend their scheduled appointments.

"Given the seriousness of their actions, it has impacted on our ability to deliver care and it's resulted in us receiving patient complaints today," Cybulskie said.

The walkout was also described by Cybulskie as unprecedented.

"It's a matter that has never occurred with professionals in the province of Ontario before, who are governed under the Hospital Labour Disputes Arbitration Act," he said.

It's a matter that would have never happened if the province had agreed to unrestricted central bargaining for all 40 hospitals, said Larry Lovelace, respiratory therapist and president of Local 643.

"We just want the 40 hospitals that are in central bargaining to have the same playing field for negotiations as the ONA (the Ontario Nurses

Association)," he said.

"That's all they had to agree to and this would have been prevented."

Under central bargaining, wages would be equal across the province and Northern Ontario hospitals would not have the problem of recruitment and retention, if that were the case, Lovelace said.

The issue is complex, Cybulskie said. The aim to negotiate and sign off a memorandum for joint bargaining was jeopardized when the union wanted to have some specific amendments made that deviated from past practice of the hospital, he said.

A fundamental disagreement between the parties arose when the union wanted to utilize arbitration awards from other hospitals when parties proceeded to arbitration when they were unable to negotiate a central agreement, he said.

"So this would (provide) the ability to cherry pick an award for the purpose of saying this was a precedent for the 40 hospitals that are participating in central bargaining," Cybulskie said.

"There ended up being a fundamental disagreement between the parties over that particular issue so there was never a memorandum for joint bargaining signed off."

TDH is one of six hospitals throughout the province who will move to arbitration, he said.

There are six dated scheduled for arbitration, three days in March and three in April.

Meanwhile, hospital officials will deliberate on an appropriate course of action with walkout participants, but it will be done in consultation with other hospitals.

"The issue we're dealing with is bigger than this hospital and them as individuals," Cybulski said. "We will be examining what action we should be taking with our employees over the next period of time."

"We'll be dialoguing with the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) and other hospitals in terms of

what approach would be and we would want to make sure we take appropriate action in terms of dealing with illegal behaviour."

Rick Dagenais, OPSEU staff representative, said union members hope no action is taken against TDH employees.

Union members were concerned about immediate consequences and MPP Gilles Bisson (NDP -- Timmins-James Bay) was brought in as a mediator.

"We asked Gilles Bisson to come in because he is very influential in his position and a great mediator and he helped to bring today to a conclusion," said Dagenais.

Both Bisson and Dagenais were aware there are no guarantees as to the outcome.

Employees taking part in the illegal walkout could be disciplined. They could be fined as much as \$2,000 for the day and the union could face fines of up to \$20,000, if prosecution under the labour board ruling is successful.

"What the province decides to do may be out of the hands of this hospital," Bisson said. "But we're confident that this hospital understands."

Dagenais stated that critical care at the hospital was maintained throughout the walkout and union members were ready to return to work to their full duties.

"We decided to take some action to address these problems, bring it to the public's attention," he said. "We believe we've accomplished what we wanted to accomplish today, so we are returning."