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'Policy' hampers NOSM talks

KRIS KETONEN
08/24/2010

The dean of the Northern Ontario School of Medicine (NOSM) says the school is in a "tricky position" when it comes to meeting the demands of striking workers due to a provincial government policy on public service compensation.

Included in the Ontario Liberal 2010 budget was a new policy aimed at reeling in compensation costs in order to trim the provincial deficit. Current collective agreements will be honoured, but when those expire, the government expects a two-year freeze on compensation.

That's total compensation, Dr. Roger Strasser clarified Monday. A wage increase could be granted, for example, but it would have to be accommodated through cutbacks in other areas.

About 150 clerical, administrative and technical staff at NOSM's main campuses at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay and Laurentian in Sudbury, as well as satellite campuses in Timmins and Sault Ste. Marie, have been on strike since Aug. 16. The workers, represented by Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) Local 677, say overtime, workload, job classifications and sick leave are among the major stumbling blocks in contract negotiations.

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"The government is the main funder of the Northern Ontario School of Medicine, so we really have no choice but to follow government policy," Strasser said. "At the negotiation table, there's an acknowledgment that that's the government policy, but that doesn't seem to affect the requests."

Tyler England, the union's bargaining committee chairman, pointed out that the government policy on compensation for unionized workers is just that – policy. There's no hard-and-fast legislation backing it up.

"We don't think it applies to us at all," England said. "It has no impact on these negotiations."

England questioned a statement released Monday by NOSM, which indicated that OPSEU negotiators and executives have said the union is "prepared to accept status quo benefits and wages" as they work toward a first contract.

"The only thing that we've ever reported is that we would talk about status quo for benefits, but definitely not for wages," England said. "In the past, we've always received three-per-cent increases, so if that's what they're referring to as status quo, then I guess that's technically true."

Strasser said there is legislation prohibiting compensation increases for non-union government employees.

"The staff of the school who are not in the bargaining unit, the last pay raise they had was in July of 2008," Strasser said, adding that with the legislated two-year freeze which took effect in March, "our non-union staff will actually have three years without any increase."

Strasser said the government has begun consultations with public sector union leaders on compensation. They started about two weeks ago.

"OPSEU representatives attended those meetings in the last two weeks," Strasser said. "Because of this happening, we did ask the OPSEU negotiators for a pause in the negotiations to allow this process to go forward, and they declined that. So we had no choice but to keep negotiating, at least until the union decided to pull out."

England said the union has been trying to negotiate this agreement for nearly a year, and wasn't willing to take a hiatus.

"This process could take another six or eight months, and we'd still be no further ahead," he said.

Meanwhile, OPSEU members held marches and rallies in Thunder Bay and Sudbury on Monday.

The Sudbury march was in the morning, and Thunder Bay's in the evening. The latter included a silent vigil outside the Metis Nation of Ontario hall while an orientation dinner for new medical students was taking place inside.

The union assured that there would be no disruptions, and members would hand out information as opposed to staffing a full-on picket line.

"We want to support the students and minimize any impact that we have on the students," England said.

Strasser said the dinner is an important one for students.

"This dinner is hosted by the Thunder Bay Metis community," he said. "The Aboriginal reference group of the school recommended that we hold this dinner in honour of the fact that it's the year of the Metis."

"It's very important for our new medical students that are just starting their orientation (Monday) to understand the importance of our relationship with the Metis and the First Nations."

After the vigil, the group was to assemble for a rally across the street at Thunder Bay city hall. Among the guest speakers was OPSEU president Warren (Smokey) Thomas, who was also at the Sudbury march.

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No new talks have been scheduled, but things are inching forward, Strasser said, noting NOSM's chief negotiator reached the mediator last week.

"This is a government-appointed mediator, who does work on behalf of the Ministry of Labour," Strasser said. "There are a lot of different labour negotiations going on, so there's a lot of call on her time."

Now that NOSM has an idea of the mediator's availability, negotiators can start looking at potential dates to restart talks, he said.
[Top of Page](#)



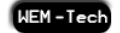
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