

ALGONQUIN TIMES

STUDENT OWNED AND OPERATED

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November 29, 2006

Part-time issues taken to the UN

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After a recent International Labour Organization ruling, Ontario labour leaders are accusing the provincial government of keeping part-time college faculty in third-world working conditions, damaging our national reputation and being an embarrassment to Canada.

Last week, the United Nations-based International Labour Organization ruled that part-time college workers should be given the legal right to unionize, thus pressuring the provincial government to make the necessary changes to the Colleges Collective Bargaining Act of 1975.

The ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association stated in its ruling that it "fails to see any reason why the principles on the basic rights of association and collective bargaining afforded to all workers should not also apply to part-time employees."

Roger Couvrette, first president of the newly-formed Organization of Part-time and Sessional Employees at Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology and part-time English professor at Algonquin, slammed the Ontario government for allowing "third-world working conditions to persist in Ontario colleges."

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James Clancy

NUPGE national president

"You expect to hear that ILO ruling on the way companies treat workers in countries like Indonesia and India," he said. "Like those workers, the 16,000 part-time college workers in Ontario's community colleges are a source of cheap labour. We have no job security, our working conditions are abysmal and we have no benefits."

Couvrette admitted that his comparison of Canadian and third-world working conditions may be a little extreme, but he said it fit in this situation.

"It's really quite astonishing that (the government) has to be told about workers' rights by an organization in Switzerland that has to remind third-world countries about workers' rights. They seem to have it backward," said Couvrette.

"(Couvrette) is not off the mark with his analogy," said Paddy Musson, chair of OPSEU's Community Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Academic division. "You wouldn't think that Canada would be a country that would deny labour rights to its workers."

The National Union for Public and General Employees filed a complaint with the ILO in June 2005 on behalf of the part-time faculty at Ontario's 24 colleges.

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Leah Casselman
OPSEU president

"The right to join a union and bargain collectively is one of the most fundamental and well-recognized international human rights," said NUPGE national president James Clancy in a press release. "It has been endorsed enthusiastically by all governments in Canada, but yet in the province of Ontario it is denied to 16,000 workers. The (ILO's) decision is a disgrace to Canada's international reputation."

OPSEU president Leah Casselman said she will be contacting Premier Dalton McGuinty to strongly urge him to listen to the ILO's decision and amend the Colleges Collective Bargaining Act.

"This unfair denial of fundamental rights is an embarrassment to both Ontario and Canada," she said. "The province should immediately seize upon the ILO's recommendation to correct a long-standing injustice."

"The ILO's ruling will be helpful to push the government to do what we need it to do, but the UN can't force anything to change," said Musson. "We know they have no direct ability to make changes, but hopefully they have embarrassed the government enough to get them to change the CCBA."

Couvrette said he hopes the ILO ruling will provide the pressure the government needs to change the legislation, which is the only thing standing in the way of the union becoming official.

"We (at OPSECAAT) realize that we have a lot of work to do, and we have our work cut out for us," he said. "But it would be a lot easier if the Ontario government would voluntarily decide to enter the 21st century on its own."