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## Talks continue as strike looms at Ontario colleges

The Brampton Guardian

Wednesday August 20 2008

By ROGER BELGRAVE

BRAMPTON - Talks between Ontario colleges and thousands of support staff continue under a media blackout.

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The existing contract for staff at Brampton's Sheridan College and other colleges across the province expires Aug. 31. The 6,500 non-academic employees, including maintenance workers, cleaners, technology staff, student advisors, registration personnel, clerical staff and financial aid officers, have rejected management's contract proposals and voted to strike at the province's 24 colleges if negotiations do not improve.

Negotiators with the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU), which represents college support staff, and the Colleges Compensation and Appointments Council, which represents colleges, returned to the bargaining table last week. During a union meeting in July workers rejected a six per cent wage increase offer over two years. About 69 per cent of workers at the same meeting also voted to strike if the colleges do not come up with a better proposal.

"Our members are looking for the same percentage wage increase offered to other employees of the colleges," said OPSEU Bargaining Chair Rod Bemister in a news release.

In June 2006, an arbitrator gave college academic staff a 13.5 per cent wage increase over four years. That contract ends Aug. 31, 2009 and came after a 17-day strike by college faculty that disrupted classes for thousands of students.

College management noted those wage increases were imposed by an arbitrator and not negotiated at the bargaining table between both sides. Council negotiators also appear unwilling to compare support staff and academic staff wages at the bargaining table.

"The appropriate comparator group for support staff are employees who perform similar duties in the broader public sector and Ontario public sector," the council has stated. "We believe this (current management proposal) is a fair offer in light of other public sector settlements, which are trending at 3 per cent or less." Sheridan employs more than 370 full-time support staff. According to the council, colleges are developing contingency plans to begin school as scheduled Sept. 2 and remain open in the event of a strike that could last several weeks. "Sheridan is committed to minimizing disruption for our students. Please rest assured that classes will proceed as scheduled in September and that contingency plans will be in place in case a strike is called by the union," the college promises on its Web site. "The intention is to do everything possible to serve our students and provide them with the education and services that they expect and deserve."

Sheridan has about 15,000 full-time students at campuses in Brampton and Oakville. The existing deal between the colleges and support staff is effective Aug. 31, 2005 to Aug. 31, 2008 and included a 9.4 per cent pay increase.

More information, updates and details about negotiations can be found online at the college's Web site [www1.sheridainstitute.ca](http://www1.sheridainstitute.ca), the union's Web site at [www.opseu.org](http://www.opseu.org) and the council site at [www.thecouncil.on.ca](http://www.thecouncil.on.ca).

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