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# Overcrowding in jails behind sick time issue -union

Posted By **KEITH LESLIE, THE CANADIAN PRESS**

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Reports of dozens of Ontario correctional officers calling in sick at the same facility last weekend have the province's opposition parties concerned for public safety.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union said Wednesday it had heard about an outbreak of so-called blue flu" at the Penetanguishene jail near Barrie, but could not confirm reports that up to 63 workers called in sick.

While pointing out the employees may actually have been ill, OPSEU spokesman Don Ford admitted Ontario's 5,500 guards are fed up after two decades of broken government promises to reduce overcrowding in the province's jails.

My God, what do you expect, especially when you have not addressed the same conditions we've been raising for the last 20 years?" Ford asked.

Their commitment on overcrowding was to stare at it for the last 20 years and then try to punish corrections officers for taking too much sick time."

Correctional Services Minister Rick Bartolucci said he is concerned" about absenteeism, but made it clear he didn't want to inflame" the situation by criticizing the corrections officers over an issue he said is being dealt with at the negotiating table.

Obviously we want to ensure that working conditions are such that correctional officers don't have to book off sick," Bartolucci said.

We want to ensure that corrections officers are respected for the incredibly difficult job that they do."

Any time dozens of guards phone in sick at one jail, the public has been put at risk, said Opposition Leader Bob Runciman.

I would encourage the leadership of the union to do whatever's necessary to conduct negotiations in an appropriate way and do so without supporting or encouraging actions that could jeopardize public safety," he said.

The New Democrats accused the government of failing to deal with understaffing and overcrowding" at Ontario's jails.

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It's a public safety issue when overcrowded jails cause workers to become sick, cause workers to undergo excessive levels of stress, and create climates where the potential for inmate violence is very, very high and oftentimes a reality," said NDP justice critic Peter Kormos.

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Steve Small, Assistant Deputy Minister of Corrections, said that he is going to kick out all of the Correctional Officers onto the "street" if there is a strike. Thank you for the respect, or lack of. We won't be making any money to feed our families because you are going to kick us out onto the "street" and surely our family members will also appreciate what kind of person you really are. And how Small to make this comment.

So Mr. Bartolucci doesn't have to comment to inflame the situation as his Assistant Deputy Ministers do this. That also shows the "respect" Correctional Officers get for the incredibly difficult job they do and Mr. Bartolucci is correct in that statement.

What Mr. Small is saying is that he will violate the Essential Services Agreement and break the law by locking Correctional Officers out of the institutions they have been deemed essential workers at. When this occurs, managers move in earning around \$1500 per day and live in the institutions until forced out, before and after they do brag about how much they made or will make and what they bought/will buy which doesn't help workplace moral either. The ministry also has to pay essential workers who show up for work but are locked out by management. Talk about a waste, this will all cost more than the inflated and false numbers given to the media about Correctional Officers sick time. In my opinion this is an illegal cash grab by Public Service managers. This activity was widespread in the 2002 OPS strike forced upon its workers by the provincial government.

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