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Corrections officers stage protest

Seek new deal with province

Posted By Chelsey Romain, The Daily Press

Posted 2 days ago

Correctional workers and probation officers staged a picket line at the government complex in Porcupine on Friday. Unionized workers wanted to inform members of the public of their side of the story in ongoing contract negotiations.

More than a dozen workers from both the corrections and youth workers divisions from the Ontario Public Service Employees Union took part.

Comprised of two bargaining divisions, the Ontario Public Service has been involved in negotiations since November 2008. Last month, the unified division of OPS ratified a four-year agreement, while the corrections division rejected the government's offer.

"If we go on strike, it would not only affect what's going on in the institutions," said Monteith Correctional Complex union president Chris Saumur. "Once these people are out in the community they would not be kept track of.

"This is why our jobs are more important than people think."

In addition to the potential for riots and escapes from correctional complexes and jails, Saumur said prisoners convicted of assault and even child pornography would be out on the streets without having to report to parole officers on a regular basis.

While the essential services agreement is still being negotiated, Andrew Ferrier, the steward for Children and Youth Services, said past agreements have always brought a reduction in services.

"It's all speculation right now, but they could be dropping us to 12 hours a week," he said. "We would have limited hours in the office and only deal with emergencies.

"We're 100 per cent behind the guards."

While the province is concerned with the number of sick days being taken by correctional officers, the workers are concerned with overcrowding.

Saumur said with situations that come with the job —breaking up fights, the risk of disease, poorly ventilated buildings and high stress levels — the government should be looking at why these sick days are being taken.

"The number of sick days they are talking about are not



Members of the Ontario Public Safety Service Employees Union, which includes correctional, probation and parole officers held a protest outside the government complex in Porcupine on Friday, as negotiations over a new contract continue. The government is stating the correctional officers are taking too many sick days, while the officers are concerned with over-crowded jails.

Chelsey Romain, The Daily Press

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factual numbers. It's not as high as they are saying it is," Saumur said. "But since the last time, they still haven't addressed why it's so stressful to work there. They need to work with us to figure out why we are sick. But they're not willing to budge on that."

Recently, provincial parties leaders in Ontario were invited to tour the Toronto (Don) Jail by OPSEU's president Warren Thomas, to experience first hand the working conditions.

"Over the past few months, correctional officers and youth workers in our provincial facilities have been accused of taking excessive sick time," Thomas said in his letter to the leaders. "Yet these workers are forced to perform their duties in some of the worst working conditions in Ontario."

In Porcupine, members held signs that said "Lives depend on our services," "Our health, your safety" and "Being sick should not be a crime" as they marched past the entrance to the government building during the lunch hour.

In late January, corrections workers and union members voted 89 per cent in favour of a strike should there be no resolution.

"We're saying help us deal with the sick time and deal with the other issues," Saumur said.

He added that sick time was a big issue back in the 51-day strike in 2002. He said no progress has been made on the issue since that time.

Article ID# 1445117

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