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OPSEU members stage information picket at Quinte Detention Centre

Posted By ROB TRIPP, WHIG-STANDARD POLICE REPORTER

Posted 2 days ago

The Ontario government is deliberately inflaming debate over working conditions at provincial jails, says the president of the union representing workers at Quinte Detention Centre.

"I really believe that they're trying to create a crisis similar to what the Conservative government did before," Tom O'Neill said yesterday, as union members staged an information picket at the Napanee jail. "The Liberals are acting like Conservatives."

The picket was held to draw attention to troubled contract talks between the government and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union.

Roughly 175 members of OPSEU work at Quinte Detention Centre, including 120 correctional officers. While the government has struck deals with roughly 35,000 OPSEU members, 5,500 jail guards still don't have a contract.

They have been without an agreement since their last contract expired at the end of December. The guards gave the union a strike mandate last month. Contract talks are continuing.

The government has proposed what the union calls regressive changes that will curtail paid sick leave.

"We would call this a punitive system," said O'Neill, who is president of local 467.

O'Neill said sick time is related to stressful and dangerous working conditions.

"It's made more stressful by the overcrowding," he said.

Quinte, like other provincial jails, is badly overcrowded but the government has refused to add more space. The union says the facility was built to accommodate 96 offenders but sometimes houses more than 300.

"How they ended up with more capacity in the past, they just use floor space as a bed," O'Neill said.

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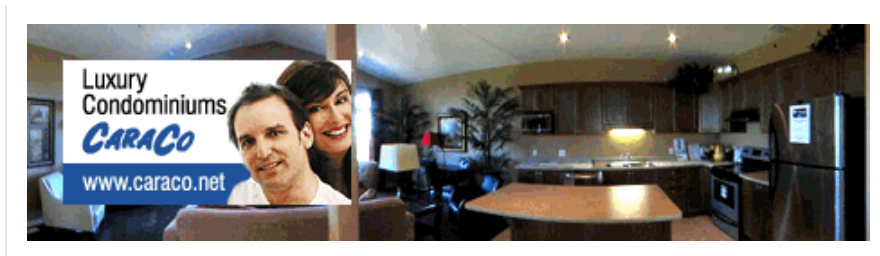
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He said mattresses are thrown down on the floors of dormitories to provide sleeping space for inmates.

"It's an incredibly bad situation, incredibly bad living conditions for the inmates and it creates bad working conditions for the staff," he said.

Judges in the region routinely give people convicted of crimes credit on sentencing at the rate of two-for-one for time served at Quinte in recognition of poor conditions there.

Last weekend, dozens of workers at the Penetanguishene jail near Barrie called in sick at the same time.

Correctional Services Minister Rick Bartolucci said he is concerned about absenteeism, but he did not want to "inflare" the situation by criticizing corrections officers over an issue that 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 told the Canadian Press.

In his last annual report, Ontario auditor general Jim McCarter said correctional officers are taking more than 32 sick days yearly, a "serious problem" that is costing the government \$20 million annually in overtime and contract staff costs.

O'Neill said he doesn't believe the figure is accurate. He thinks guards are taking roughly 20 sick days per year, on average.

He said the government has promised to add 1,200 more beds to the provincial jail system, while closing old facilities at the same time.

"So it's neutral," he said.

O'Neill said the union has fought the government for 20 years to improve conditions in jails by adding capacity.

"It's one of those systemic problems that ministry is not addressing," he said.

The New Democrats have accused the government of failing to deal with understaffing and overcrowding in Ontario's jails, problems that lead to stress, assaults and employee absenteeism.

Article ID# 1445540

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