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No jail guard slowdown locally

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Sarnia jail guards frustrated by stalled contract talks are not involved in the pressure tactics forcing courtroom delays across Ontario, a local union leader says.

While criminal lawyers are reporting delays in transferring clients between jails and courtrooms due to what they say are guards' pressure tactics, Dave Esser said Tuesday local guards haven't resorted to work-to-rule strategies.

Esser, president of the union representing local correctional services officers, said negotiations between OPSEU (Ontario Public Services Employees Union) and the government have not broken down. The Sarnia Jail guards have taken a wait and see approach, he said. "Locally, we're not seeing (those tactics)."

Frank Addario, president of the Criminal Lawyer's Assoc., said the problem is widespread and has been verified across the province.

In an interview, Addario said work slowdowns have prevented some lawyers from being able to see their clients in custody.

OPSEU denies it is directing guards to engage in any work slowdowns. The key issue in the talks is a government plan to penalize correctional officers and youth workers for taking more than five sick days a year.

The proposal follows an audit that noted correctional officers used an average of 32.5 sick days in 2007, up 63 per cent from 2001. The audit also found that court backlogs in Ontario are at the highest levels seen in 15 years.

Esser said jail guards can't be treated like office workers. If a guard breaks an arm you're looking at an automatic six-week leave.

"An office worker can still go to work. A jail guard can't work with a broken arm."

The guards, who voted 89 per cent in favour of strike action last month, are currently negotiating a new contract with the province.

However, local lawyers have complained that court backlogs are causing serious overcrowding at Sarnia Jail, resulting in long delays in bail hearings and trials.

Esser said if negotiations stall, the workers could be in a strike position as early as next month.

The Sarnia Jail employs about 50 correctional services staff.

"The guards are looking forward to a settlement," Esser said.

"We definitely don't want to go out on strike, but if we have to, we have to."

Esser said he's optimistic an agreement can be reached.

"We haven't heard anything . . . and generally when it's quiet that means negotiations are going well."

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