



Guards delaying prisoners, lawyers say

Union denies members are deliberately slowing jail-to-court transfers

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While lawyers complain of deliberate delays in getting prisoners to court, the union representing Ontario jail guards is denying accusations its members are slowing down the justice system.

Criminal lawyers are reporting significant delays in bringing prisoners to courtrooms due to what they call correctional officers' pressure tactics. The guards are negotiating a contract with the province.

"The transportation of prisoners has been extremely slow and it has affected the work of courts," said Frank Addario, president of the Criminal Lawyers' Association. "It has also prevented some lawyers from being able to see clients in custody. We don't take sides in negotiations but we want the courts to be able to work."

He said the delays have been widespread and reported from many jurisdictions in the province. "I think we started observing it about three weeks ago but it's been intense in the past 10 days," he said.

Prisoners due in court at 10 a.m. have been up to four hours late, said Addario. "Cases and bail hearings aren't being heard, and witnesses are not able to take the stand. The slowdown isn't justified."

Yesterday, a Toronto court freed two defendants on first-degree murder charges but neither was in court to hear it. Both men, who have spent almost a year in custody, were still at correctional facilities.

But a spokesperson for the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, which represents correctional officers, said their members have not resorted to

any job action.

"Yes, we are negotiating (a contract) but we haven't used pressure tactics," said Don Ford, communications officer for the union.

If there is a slowdown, it's because of security issues, he said. "You are moving a lot of inmates in and out of jail and safety is our responsibility," he said. "When an institution has to be secured, inmates can't be moved and delays are unavoidable. Nothing is being done deliberately."

Last month, correctional officers voted 89 per cent in favour of giving the union a strike mandate but OPSEU and the province have since returned to the bargaining table. Negotiations initially started in November. The sticking point in the talks is a government plan to punish correctional officers who take more than five sick days a year.

The proposal follows an audit last year that noted correctional officers in the province's jails taken an average of 32.5 sick days each year.

"There are horrible working conditions," said Ford. "There's shift work, extreme stress ... you can't punish people for falling ill."

Ford said he was hopeful of a settlement soon. About 6,000 officers would be affected in case of a strike.

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