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Local corrections workers show support

Working without contract for 2 months

Posted By DAN BELLEROSE, THE SAULT STAR

Posted 4 hours ago

Bargaining units representing more than 100 Sault Ste. Marie correctional officers and youth workers, without a contract for nearly two months, took to the streets Thursday.

"Our negotiating team has returned to the bargaining table and the rally was intended as a statement of support," said Janice Zultek, president of Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) Local 678, representing about 180 members inside the Algoma Treatment and Remand Centre, including about 120 correctional officers.

OPSEU Local 601, representing about 20 youth workers inside the Donald Doucet Youth Centre, as well as probation and parole officers, also participated in the downtown rally which began at the Sault Courthouse and wrapped up outside the office of Sault MPP David Oraziotti.

The membership of the two locals are among 5,500 OPSEU correctional staff province wide whose four-year contract expired Dec. 31 and whose units provided its provincial bargaining team with a nearly 90 per cent strike mandate, if necessary, last month.

The provincial government began negotiations with its 40,000-member public sector union in November and before Christmas it had a tentative deal with 35,000 employees but not the correctional sector.

The correctional sector has stated it is fed up with two decades of broken government promises to reduce overcrowding in the province's jails and what it calls "regressive changes" by government negotiators that would curtail sick leave.

The government is concerned about the spiraling costs of absenteeism within the correctional ranks.

The Ontario Auditor General's last report declared correctional sick time, "a serious problem," claiming that officers, on average, were taking more than 32 sick days annually, down time costing the government more than \$20 million in overtime and replacement costs.

"We are not prepared to accept that we are abusing the system," said Zultek, whose union also disputes the average annual sick-day totals of the Auditor General.

"Illness is a reflection of stressful and dangerous working conditions. . . Overcrowding adds to the stress."

The government proposal, say union officials, would remove "front line" correctional officers and youth workers employed in detention facilities from the Ontario Public Service short-term sick plan if there were not a significant reduction in annual average sick time.

If lower thresholds were not reached then an alternative plan would be implemented, managed by a private insurance carrier.

OPSEU has about 1,000 members in 18 provincial ministries throughout Algoma District, including nearly 800 in the city itself.

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The public service sector has twice hit the pavement in labour disputes with the provincial government in recent years, for six weeks in 2002 and five weeks in 1996.

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