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Parks renege on pay, student workers say Holiday, vacation wages axed

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Students working at Wheatley Provincial Park say their boss, the provincial government, is violating their employment contracts.

Gate staff attendant Sabrina Crawford said she signed a contract stipulating she would receive eight per cent vacation and holiday pay for the duration of her employment this summer. But she hasn't seen a cent of that money.

"We all think it's pretty unfair," said Crawford, one of about 20 students who work at the park. "We were told that we would be getting the eight per cent and on our contract we signed it thinking that we were going to get that extra money. But then the government realized that they had made a mistake and they took it away from us."

Ontario Ministry of Government Services spokesperson Ciaran Ganley said the province issued vacation and holiday pay to students for years, but realized during a recent expenditure review that it wasn't required to do so.

"Students are not eligible to receive pay in lieu of vacation and holidays. They never have been," Ganley said.

Under the province's Employment Standards Act, most employers are required to provide workers with both vacation and public holiday pay. However, some unionized employers, including the provincial government and hospitals, are exempt from certain sections of the act, Ganley said.

Once the province realized its mistake, it notified the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, which represents the students, that the payments would cease.

But due to what Ganley called "an administrative error," contracts issued to students before May 4 included the eight per cent pay. The government notified students shortly afterwards that they would not receive the payment.

"The government did not seek to recover any funds that were paid in error," Ganley said. "They were forgiven, basically."

Crawford has worked at the park for five summers, and said she has received the extra pay every year. Two weeks into her job this year, she and the other student staff were surprised to learn their contract would not be honoured. She said the vacation and holiday pay amounts to between \$450 and \$800, depending on the length of the contract.

"We were just obviously pretty upset," she said. "I think that the government should be a role model for other employers, but we're actually being treated worse. Students working at the Ontario government are making less than (employees at) Walmart and McDonald's," Crawford said.

But Ganley said 73 per cent of OPSEU-employed students make \$11.10 per hour -- \$1.60 more than minimum wage.

OPSEU spokeswoman Megan Park said while there was never a provision in the collective agreement for the vacation and holiday pay, the province has a moral obligation to issue the payments to its 3,400 student employees.

"They are nickel and diming the workers who need the money the most," Park said. She estimated the province pays no more than \$2 million per year to students in vacation and holiday pay.

Students at Wheatley, Algonquin and Pinery provincial parks will hold an information picket today to inform park visitors of the issue.

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