



At Queen's Park this week:

OPSEU issues set the agenda

With a provincial election looming, issues first raised by OPSEU members dominated debate on the floor of the Legislature this week – and the news.

“We have talked longer and louder than anyone about the need to rebuild our public services,” said OPSEU president Leah Casselman. “I want to congratulate OPSEU members for all their work to put this crisis on the map.

“We’re setting the agenda for the upcoming election,” she said. “On election day, we want the question on voters’ minds to be, ‘How can I defeat this government and elect someone who actually understands the value of public services?’”

Dispatchers sound alarm over wage parity

Sixty emergency communicators (ambulance dispatchers) from across the province brought their message for wage parity to Queen’s Park on May 5.

Communicators from London, Hamilton, Mississauga, Barrie, Oshawa, Renfrew, Sudbury, Thunder Bay and the air ambulance dispatch centre in Vaughan came to Toronto to rally and lobby MPPs.

“We told the government loud and clear that public safety is at risk unless they solve the understaffing and underfunding of our centres,” said Patrick Fry-Smith, vice-president, Local 201, at the Hamilton Communications Centre.

“I thought we accomplished a lot,” said Local 147 steward Dave Potts of the London

Communications Centre. “We got the attention of a lot more MPPs than were willing to listen to us before. And we got the attention of the media.”

The story ran 24 times on radio and television. At least 16 newspapers across Ontario ran stories.

Wages for emergency communicators in the OPS and broader public service units are far below those at neighbouring fire and police dispatch centres. With communicators earning up to \$20,000 a year less, it’s no wonder annual turnover rates now top **70** per cent (yes, you read it right).

After the 2002 strike, OPSEU learned that the government had covered up a key report, paid for by the Ministry, that said higher wages for communicators would help solve the staffing crisis.

“It’s quite clear what the government has to do,” said OPSEU President Casselman at the dispatchers’ press conference. “It has to follow the recommendations of its own report and pay dispatchers what they deserve so Ontario can recruit and retain more of them to help save lives.”

Communicators took their message to NDP MPPs Marilyn Churley, Dave Christopherson, Peter Kormos, Shelley Martel and Michael Prue; Liberal MPPs Jim Bradley, Alvin Curling, Bruce Crozier, Pat Hoy, Dave Levac, Ted McMeekin, Sandra Pupatello, Steve Peters, Dave Ramsay, and Michael Gravelle; and Conservative MPPs Helen Johns, Frank Mazilli, Bob Wood, and John

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O'Toole. Johns is also the Minister of Agriculture. The Tories said they would raise the issue in the Tory caucus.

"With an election coming up, we're going to keep up the pressure on the Conservatives and the opposition parties," said Sandy Edwards, vice-president, Local 302 at the Oshawa Central Ambulance Communications Centre. "We're not going away."

"We take our jobs seriously," said Colette Cooke of Local 313 at the Georgian Communications Centre. "All we're asking is for the government to take our concerns as seriously as we take every 9-1-1 call that we answer 24/7, 365 days of the year."

Don Jail conditions hit front page of Toronto Star

For decades, OPSEU has campaigned for better conditions in Ontario correctional facilities. Jail conditions – never very good – have worsened under eight years of Conservative rule. In February 2001, the union asked then Corrections Minister Norm Sterling to join a task force looking into jail conditions. He ignored the request, so the OPSEU Corrections Ministry Employee Relations Committee did its own survey. The survey report, *Sabotage*, documented a sharp rise in overcrowding, inmate gangs, infectious diseases and filth behind bars.

The front page of Tuesday's Toronto *Star* read like a page from that report. On Monday, a Superior Court judge gave a man convicted of attempted murder a seven-year reduction in his federal sentence as credit for serving 28 months in the "medieval, brutal" Toronto (Don) Jail. A rise in the number of such "three-for-one" deals was first publicized by OPSEU in province-wide radio ads during the 2002 OPS strike.

On Tuesday, Liberal Corrections critic Dave Levac took a friend on a tour of the Don. Levac's "friend" turned out to be top *Star* reporter Linda Diebel.

Her exposé blew the roof off the government's record on jails. Under attack in the

Legislature, Public Safety and Security Minister Bob Runciman blamed the courts. Seems he forgot his government runs the courts, too!

Layoffs delay West Nile test; technologists rally for wage parity

Health Minister Tony Clement was back on his heels yesterday after Liberal deputy leader Sandra Pupatello tore into him for his mishandling of the West Nile virus. In October 2001, Clement laid off the one public health scientist who was working on getting a new test for West Nile ready for the 2002 mosquito season. Dr. Ching Lo, an OPSEU member with a Ph.D. in microbiology and immunology, was one of five scientists dumped from the public health lab in Toronto.

Clement appeared at the lab Thursday morning to announce that a new West Nile lab was up and running – a year late – with the new test in place.

About 100 OPSEU lab staff came out for a coffee with reporters before Clement's announcement. While lately the Minister has praised Ontario health care workers for their handling of the SARS outbreak, he continues to pay OPS lab technologists \$10,000 less a year than they could make at a community hospital. And though infectious diseases look to be a permanent problem, all the new hires at the West Nile lab are for temporary unclassified jobs.

Meat inspectors get noticed

Even **former** OPSEU members caused a ruckus in the Legislature this week. NDP firebrand Peter Kormos rose on behalf of contract meat inspectors. Their jobs used to be OPS jobs; all but a handful have been turned into fee-for-service workers with no collective agreement rights. Here's what Kormos had to say:

"This Conservative government's gutting of our public service here in the province of Ontario continues to put increasing

numbers of people at risk. Meat inspectors are vital to food safety here in the province of Ontario. They're a key part of Ontario's public service, and they help our economy to flourish safely and responsibly. Yet we have fewer than ten full-time meat inspectors in the province of Ontario... [Some 120] contract meat inspectors... have to pay their own travel expense [and] absorb their own travel time.... It's no wonder that there's a 32 per cent turnover amongst these inspectors. I tell you that means that more and more inexperienced meat inspectors are being required to do invaluable meat inspection. That means that we are constantly being put at risk. That means that this government exposes

us in one more fashion to serious public health risk. This government should promptly restore full-time meat inspectors as part of the public service, as members of the OPSEU bargaining unit to ensure that they're adequately trained and paid, so that Ontario's meat inspectors can be counted on to ensure the public's safety."

The meat inspectors' jobs are among hundreds that are the subject of the "Bargaining Unit Integrity" grievance OPSEU filed at the Grievance Settlement Board in late April. The goal of the grievance is to make the government post OPS jobs currently being filled by temporary agency workers and fee-for-service consultants.

Keep the reports coming on bargaining unit grievance

We're still collecting information for the Bargaining Unit Integrity grievance explained in FRONTlines on April 3 (<http://www.opseu.org/ops/frontlines2apr0303.htm>) and May 1 (<http://www.opseu.org/ops/frontlines2may0103.htm>). The May 1 issue includes a report-back form for

stewards. If you know of any temporary agency workers or fee-for-service consultants working near you, fill it out and fax it in to the number on the form.

**Better
JOBS
in the OPS**

Get on the list!

You too can receive *FRONTlines*, delivered directly to your very own computer or secure fax machine. Send your request to Jackie Evans at (416) 443-1762, by e-mail to jevans@opseu.org, or by phone at 1-800-268-7376 ext. 675. Please let us know your OPSEU Local number.