

‘OPSEU Rocks!’ Hundreds join demonstrations outside ODSP offices in show of strength

Hundreds of staff, clients and supporters of the Ontario Disability Support Program rallied outside ODSP offices across Ontario on March 4 in a show of solidarity seldom before seen in the 10-year history of the agency which administers benefits and services to 325,000 clients and their families, all of whom struggle to survive on poverty incomes.

At issue was an understaffing crisis that is causing serious health problems for ODSP workers and a breakdown in the delivery of public services to recipients.

“OPSEU rocks!,” declared ODSP steward Carrolle Hamilton, of Local 635 in North Bay, in an email message to staff and stewards around the province. “I didn’t think it could be done, but wow, it happened. What an awesome show of support.”

Sister Carrolle wasn’t the only voice stating the ODSP Day of Action an unqualified success.

OPSEU president Smokey Thomas expressed his gratitude and delight for the province-wide demonstration of picket lines.

“Your presence on the picket lines demonstrated your commitment to building a stronger union movement in Ontario. I am truly grateful for your participation. Your willingness to be heard loudly sends the message that our strength grows and our demands will be met when we stand together in common cause,” he said.

Around the province, stewards reported an outpouring of support.

“Everything went great in Belleville; we had 35 members out on the line and lots of press and television. This was a great day for labour and our members responded so well. I’m so proud of them,” Sister Pam Smith, ODSP steward in Local 455, wrote in an email message.

“I’m proud to be an OPSEU member in Local 368,” wrote

steward Luanne Reparon, of Lindsay. “The support from OPSEU couldn’t have been better.”

From Orillia, executive board member Doris Middleton reported: “The turnout was great – we had about 30 in all; not bad for a small office. Great media coverage from all the local television, cable and radio stations, and two newspapers.

“It was a success; members had fun and felt ‘plugged-in,’ to use a term from our OPS bargaining weekend. We got attention. Let’s hope it helps.”

In Sault Ste Marie, a representative from NDP MP Tony Martin’s office joined the picket bearing hot chocolate and Tim Bits. “That showed us plenty of solidarity, along with the drive-by honking and supportive phone calls we received,” said steward Leanne Pold-Della Vedova, of Local 601.

At 47 Sheppard Avenue East in Toronto, Brother Richard King of Local 555 reported a “great success.” Added Sister Anita Cohen of the same ODSP location, of those who staged the information picket: “You guys are awesome!”

(Brother Richard deserves a special recognition for his workshop on “How to Mobilize for Effective Information Pickets” which he provided to ODSP stewards at a special meeting in Toronto on Feb. 26).

Added Norm Pilon, chair of the ODSP MERC subcommittee: “In Sudbury we got calls to our members from community agencies and clients providing positive



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comments about our message and media coverage. They were shocked that 'things are so bad' inside the ODSP.

"As for our members – many of whom don't generally endorse union activities – they were speaking out positively about the attention we are getting and feel much better about the work they are doing and finally feel like someone is paying attention."

That was the story around the province where noon hour pickets went up outside more than 35 ODSP offices on what amounted to a cold and blustery day in most communities.

But a bit of inclement weather hardly deterred the spirit so evident on the picket lines. From all corners of the province, the ODSP message was heard loud and clear: it's time to end the understaffing crisis by investing \$60 million in this spring's budget to bring Ontario's income support caseload ratio (currently at 530 claims for every one income support specialist) more in line with the national average of about 250:1.

Media coverage was extensive. More than 20 daily newspapers published stories about the demonstrations. Television and radio stations broadcasted multiple news stories from around Ontario. A few papers published an Op Ed opinion piece by Brother Smokey who described the problem at the ODSP in the context of the McGuinty government's failure to provide public services to marginalized and disabled Ontarians, despite its commitment to wage a war against poverty.

Displaying a finely-tuned deaf ear to the problem, Community and Social Services Minister Madeleine Meilleur issued a statement on March 4 in which she declared that her office had been working "closely" with OPSEU negotiators for five years to fix the problem.

Not so, according to ODSP MERC subcommittee members who say the employer has been doing its best to avoid discussing the understaffing crisis and that little progress has been made, despite the findings of the Lewchuk Report (paid for by Meilleur's ministry) which reported abnormal rates of stress, tensions, ill health and high absenteeism, cause by outrageous workloads that ODSP staff are expected to carry.

To add salt to the wound, and in reply to a request to meet the minister on March 4, Meilleur's office told OPSEU staff that no meeting with ODSP reps was possible until sometime in April.

The Day of Action also included a 'phone-and-go' blitz of MPP offices. Dozens of constituency offices were blitzed

by flying squads of local activists joined by OPSEU executive members. In addition, all MPP offices at Queen's Park received a media kit that explained the Day of Action and our demand for \$60 million in this spring's budget to address the understaffing crisis.

