



Executive Board Member Gino Franche, centre, looks over copies of the OPS collective agreement with, from the left, Local 130 Vice-President Bob Pelletier, Local 130 Treasurer Patty Sparks, Local 129 President Gerald Dienesch and Local 130 Secretary Marg Reed. The locals share a centre in Chatham-Kent.

## Membership centres add to union life

There's a relatively new phenomenon cropping up across the province – OPSEU membership centres.

They're places where members can go for union information, even though they aren't staffed. They're a physical presence for the union, showing members that they have stewards, local presidents and union staff watching out for their best interests.

OPSEU puts about \$12,000 a year into each centre, and the regional vice-president works with locals in the area and local services staff to find a suitable space. The \$12,000 covers rent and a phone line. The locals that use the space contribute more to equip their centres with computers, fax lines, a photocopier, small fridge, coffee maker, microwave, chairs, tables, file cabinets, flip charts and so on. The amenities vary depending on local priorities and

resources. Keeping the centres clean is a local responsibility.

Local presidents control the keys and activists use the space for a wide range of union business.

Owen Sound had the first, but it has evolved into a fully-staffed regional office. Others are in Chatham, Cornwall, Kenora, Midland, Sarnia, Simcoe and Belleville, with one in the 2003 budget for Fort Frances.

Gino Franche, president of Local 130, loves the centre in Chatham. "It's fantastic, an invaluable resource for locals to meet and do union activity. Every community should have one. I only wish it were bigger."

A small office with file cabinets has let him move nearly 200 square feet of union information out of his basement, and make it

by **Katie FitzRandolph**

accessible to his members. “It gives me, as a local president, an opportunity to separate my personal life from my union life. It gives me an office to work from, instead of taking all the calls at home.

“We have used it for meetings with staff representatives, for campaign and executive meetings, grievance hearings and for meetings of the Service Area Coordinating Group. During the Public Service strike last spring, it was strike headquarters for several locals. It’s used pretty well on a daily basis.”

Gino sees real advantages for union members in the new centres.

The sign out front increases the union’s presence in Chatham-Kent and makes OPSEU more concrete and accessible. “We encourage stewards to meet at the centre rather than at a work location, which means management ears aren’t listening in. They have somewhere to speak freely and use their own phone and photocopier.”

Another important benefit is the increased communication between local presidents and members of other locals in Chatham-Kent.

“You cross paths. We set up more meetings to share information and meetings are more productive because we aren’t interrupted. We don’t have to meet over coffee in a restaurant where people we know stop by to talk, or in someone’s house where family life intrudes.”

In Cornwall, Rhéal Delaquis is president of Local 452, and shares the membership centre with about nine other locals, five of which use it regularly.

“We used it extensively during the strike. It was a great opportunity to have everything in one place. It improved communication.”

All the various units of his composite local have used it for their meetings. His executive committee meets there, and the centre has become a repository for materials and documents where members can go for information.

“It’s a lot more practical than holding a meeting in a restaurant or renting a hall. We allocate money for meetings, and now we can spend it on refreshments instead of the hall. It enhances participation and active membership.”

Unit stewards have keys, which enhances access. People book the space on the bulletin board.

Photo: Dwight Stoneman



A new membership centre is opened in Midland.

Rhéal hopes the new membership centre will even revitalize the area council, by bringing the leaders of the locals in the area together more often, but “that hasn’t happened yet.”

At the other end of the province, Fred Richardson, president of Local 702, is finding uses for the new centre in Kenora.

It’s in an excellent location on the main street near the bus station and can hold about 75 people. Fred’s local executive meets there, alternating with the meetings in the government office. That works, he says, because the relationship with local management is quite good.

Locals in the Broader Public Service are using the centre more because they are in contract negotiations, and it is good to have an off-site place to meet, Fred said.

He thinks the Kenora Labour Council may be able to use the space too. “I don’t think there are any other union halls in Kenora.”

Back in Chatham, Local 140 president Fran O’Keefe uses the centre for executive meetings and preparing for grievances.

Her local in a merged hospital – Chatham-Kent Health Alliance – includes hospital professionals and a clerical unit. They once had an office in the hospital they shared with the Ontario Nurses Association, but that has been cut back in the merger and the union’s computer was lost. The membership centre fills a void, and she expects it to become even more useful as bargaining heats up for the hospital professionals division. ▲