

OPSEU



SEFPO

Ontario *Our*

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The face behind 911

OPSEU members are on their toes – and at their consoles – dispatching emergency vehicles and professionals to our emergencies. See Page 4.

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Ontario towns don't want them.

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Why care about global trade?

Our jobs are on the line



By Leah Casselman

The stark and insecure futuristic world that George Orwell described 50 years ago could fast become reality.

Global trading blocs are carving up the world. Workers are scrambling to keep jobs, while corporations shift their operations from continent to continent in search of bigger and bigger profits. "Big Brother" technology is intruding more and more on our rights as individual workers.

The current Ontario government is a willing pawn in this global game: slashing taxes, cutting and privatizing public services, and relaxing environmental controls. So far, this has created mostly lower-wage, insecure jobs. Meanwhile, higher-paid jobs in government, in education and in the auto, steel and airline industries, are under attack from deregulation and downsizing.

Globalization has been described as "a race to the bottom" that benefits a few billionaires. The rest of us pay the price. Publicly funded services are at extreme risk, as are any activities performed for the collective good of all.

This battle isn't over yet. Globalization may be inevitable, but the rules of the game are just being written. The World Trade Organization (WTO) is crucial to this process. The WTO is dominated by governments (including Canada's) that are generally sympathetic to the aims of trans-national corporations.

But the events at the WTO talks in Seattle last November showed

that people acting collectively can have an impact. There, in a city dominated by the giant Microsoft, we forced decisions about global trade into the open. We forced a wider discussion, rather than a back room deal.

Labour, human rights and environmental groups fought to make sure our voices were heard – on the streets of Seattle, in the WTO sessions attended by delegates of non-governmental organizations, and around the world. As part of our National Union's delegation, we were able to ask why globalization has so far resulted in increased wealth and power for a few, but poverty and job insecurity for so many.

The result at Seattle may have been inconclusive, but the giant corporations did not win the day.

George Orwell predicted that global power struggles and Big Brother would weaken and isolate individuals. But perhaps he didn't envision the flip side. Technology, including the Internet and an independent media, could empower a collective, worldwide movement to protect jobs and counter the worst effects.

OPSEU members must be part of that movement.

Leah Casselman, President



Bill Trbovich photo

OPSEU honours systemic change facilitators.

These OPSEU Corrections Division members are among 18 receiving certificates recognizing their work as facilitators in a year-long program designed to create a work environment free of discrimination and harassment.

Women's march focuses on equality

OPSEU is one of more than 2,000 organizations planning for a global women's march for hope, equality, peace and democracy. Events in Canada will include a tribunal on federal policies in May and another national event in October.

A series of local events will highlight different themes each month from March to October.

The idea for a world march of women in 2000 sprung from Quebec's Women's March Against Poverty in 1995.

Then in 1997, men and women launched a pan-Canadian action, walking

through communities and holding lively events to draw attention to issues such as poverty and the need for better child and elder care. A

caravan of marchers from east and west met in Ottawa in June, at conferences sponsored by the Canadian Labour Congress and the National Action Committee on the Status of Women.

Today, women in more than 130

countries are working on the World March of Women.

The Ontario Federation of Labour, with local labour councils, has planned organizing workshops in 20 centres in late March and April. Get the details from your labour council.



The goals include demanding an end to poverty and violence against women; promoting equality between men and women; stimulating grassroots involvement and demonstrating women's ongoing determination to change the world.

Watch the OPSEU web site and publications for ways to get involved. The World March of Women web site at www.ffq.qc.ca/marche2000/en/index.html has more information.

Our Ontario, the official publication of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, is published four times a year for OPSEU members.
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Recent settlements:

Community Living Oakville

Members of Local 249 at Community Living Oakville ratified a new collective agreement Jan. 16, ending a 10-week strike.

The employer withdrew concession demands on sick leave. The 52 full-time and 73 part-time workers won a 2 per cent increase in 1999, and gains in vision care and massage therapy. The contract runs April 1, 1999 to March 31, 2001.

Intégration Communautaire Cochrane Community Living

Local 641 ratified a new contract Jan. 14 ending a 107-day strike.

Members made gains on all their strike issues. They won their principle of fair and equitable shift distribution, a guarantee of hours of work for part-timers, a 2 per cent staged wage increase, and an additional 3 per cent in lieu of benefits for part-timers. They also gained a commitment from the employer to deal with scheduling issues.

The new collective agreement runs March 31, 1999 to June 30, 2001.

BPS leaders chart course

They've got a plan. And they're going to make it happen.

Executive members from OPSEU sectors in the Broader Public Service met Jan. 28-30 in Toronto to chart a course for the next two years. Their goal? Better collective agreements for all members.

"We said, 'Where do we want to be at the end of 2001?' and then worked it out from there," said Local 460 president Gavin Anderson, chair of the Child Treatment Sector. "We have a very ambitious plan that's focused on our collective agreements."

Some of the goals for the Child Treatment Sector are:

- Ongoing communications through phone trees, e-mail,

a sector newsletter and – within one year – a web page;

- A full turnout from all 27 bargaining units at sector meetings;
- Working towards common contract expiry dates in the sector; and
- Developing a bargaining strategy through participation by all units.

Delegates from other sectors put together their own plans to improve communication, research, and strategy across their sectors.

The weekend was a follow-up to the larger Broader Public Service (BPS) conference, "Building a Network for Better Contracts," held in November.

OPS pension buy-back doesn't apply to OPSEU

OPSEU members in the Ontario Public Service may be wondering about an article in the Jan. 21 *Topical*. It's about a one-year window to let members of the Public Service Pension Plan buy back past service if they missed the previous deadline.

This does not apply to OPSEU members. OPS members' pensions fall under the OPSEU Pension Trust (OPT) – a better proposition all around.

The buy-back opening for non-OPSEU members is not a good deal. Employees have to pay for the buy-back in one shot, which could mean borrowing \$10,000 to \$20,000.

There is no payroll deduction allowed. In fact, people covered by the PSPP lose payroll deduction for all future buy-backs. Still, they may be anxious to buy back past service because they lose the Factor 80 early retirement option on March 31.

OPSEU members in the OPT can take Factor 80 until March 31, 2002 at least, thanks to the high performance of the jointly-controlled OPT. Payroll deductions will continue for those buying back past service.

For information, call the OPT at 1-800-906-7738 or (416) 681-6161.

Strike Supporters: Big and small



Patricia Lemon, Local 153

Canapress photo - S. Martin

NDP Leader Howard Hampton (left above) joins striking members of Local 153 in London, Feb. 5. The local represents members who work for the Salvation Army Village, providing long-term care for 49 developmentally disabled clients. At left, Mary Kathleen, daughter of Eileen MacLean, models her mother's picket line hat. The strike began Dec. 14.

OPSEU charges government over plutonium shipment

OPSEU has taken the Ministry of Natural Resources to court for exposing its staff to plutonium.

The controversial and secretive shipment of American radioactive plutonium went through the ministry's hangar in Sault Ste. Marie, where it was transferred by helicopter to the Atomic Energy of Canada Limited's facility in Chalk River.

Earlier plans to truck the deadly material prompted communities along the route

to threaten blockades. The airlift took everyone by surprise.

OPSEU's charges, filed Jan. 31 under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, claim the ministry exposed its employees to radiation, failed to tell them about it, and gave them no instruction or supervision in protecting themselves.

About 40 workers (pilots, flight engineers, mechanics, fire fighters and maintenance staff) were in the hangar when the plutonium was

brought in.

Employees received an e-mail and a health report from the employer – after the fact – saying the plutonium posed no danger. They were told not to discuss it outside the ministry.

"This is a very serious breach of the Health and Safety Act," said Bob DeMatteo, senior health and safety officer. "This negligent action could have placed dozens of workers in serious danger."

You call 911 Who answers?

'If it's an emergency, it's my job,' says Local 633's Sue Lowther, an OPP dispatcher in North Bay.

It could be Sue Lowther, an unclassified OPP dispatcher in North Bay. Or it might be Dennis McKaig, dispatching ambulances to emergencies from his base in London.

Sue is one of a dozen members of Local 633 in the busy, noisy dispatch room, fielding calls from anywhere in the North Bay region or Essex County, near Windsor.

It's a job that can go from boring to extremely stressful in an instant.

"We dispatch fire and ambulance as well as police and tow trucks. If it's an emergency situation, it's my job," Sue said. "There are days when you don't stop and days when nothing happens."

There are two sides to the job: call taking, and dispatching. "If I'm dealing with the public it's

my job to be polite and as helpful as possible. If I'm dispatching, my officers' safety comes first to help the officers help the public."

The call-taker locates the problem, then forwards the call to the appropriate dispatcher.

"Say I was doing (dispatching for) North Bay, I'd have North Bay, Mattawa, Powassan, Burke's Falls and all those little communities in between and up toward Tilden Lake. I would be calling one of the three OPP detachments to tell them what is happening.

"A serious assault or accident takes priority over a lost dog. A call may sound like nothing and the officer arrives to a serious problem. Or something sounds wild and it isn't."

If it's a 911 call, Sue asks if the caller needs police, fire or ambulance and hits a button to link the caller to the right service. She stays on



Canapress photo - P. Chivers

the line to ensure the caller is connected and the emergency service is responding.

'Where is your emergency?'

If the call is for the police, her response is, "OPP, where is your emergency?" "Then even if we lose the call, we know where to go."

For Sue, the best thing about the job is a shift when everything is perfect. "You do all

UNION
People

the right things, you anticipated what would happen, you got the information as it was needed, and you feel you did a great job.”

One such was a pursuit on Highway 69 in the wee morning hours. A driver was “all over the road,” and she was talking to the pursuing officer. “He reported the car was southbound in the northbound lane with an on-coming car. My heart was pounding. The driver veered back and the two cars’ mirrors crashed.” Sue coordinated another OPP unit coming from Parry Sound with a spike belt. Finally the car was stopped. “The driver was 80, and had just re-passed his driving test. He had no idea he was being pursued or that he had driven over a spike belt. It ended great. Just two smashed mirrors, and everyone was safe.”

For Sue, the downside is the 12-hour shifts. “You work so many weekends and holidays and I miss the time with my family.”

Hours of boredom; minutes of terror

Dennis, president of Local 147, dispatches 57 ambulances from 35 bases out of a cubicle in London.

He covers Middlesex, Elgin, Perth, Oxford, Huron, Grey-Bruce, and parts of Lambton counties – from Port Stanley to Tobermory. At peak times, there are six dispatchers and call-takers.

The job is “hours of boredom followed by minutes of sheer terror. You can sit and wait for the phone to ring and then five will ring and they are all life and death situations.

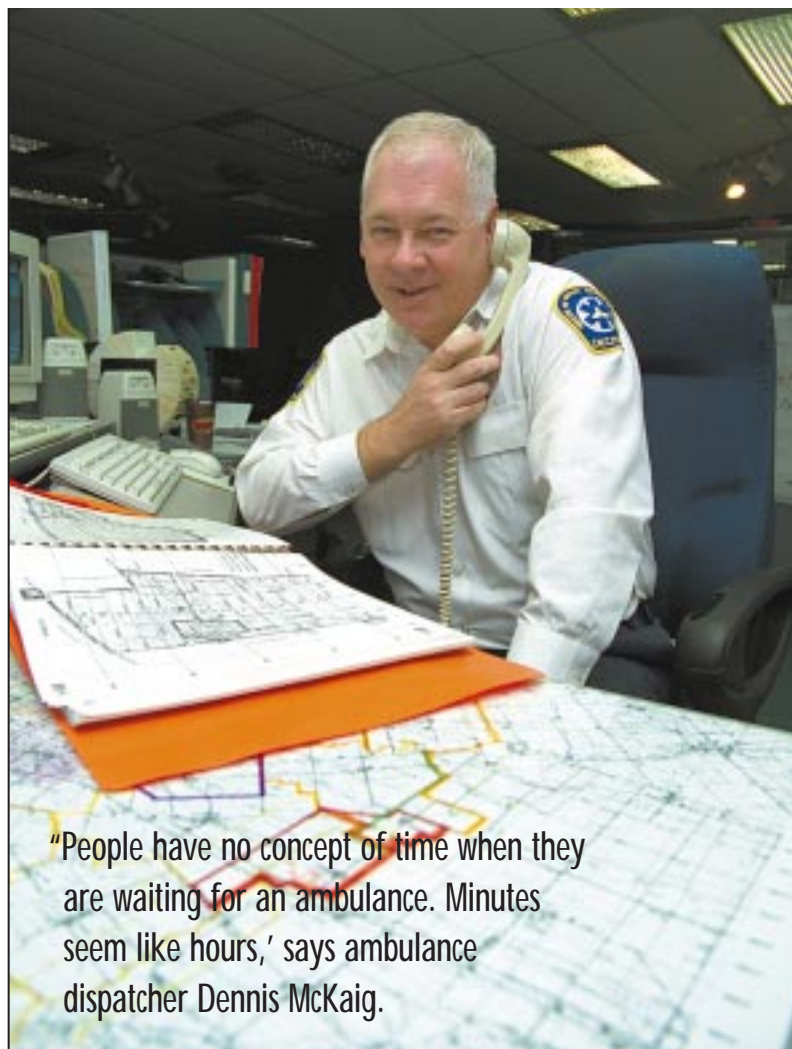
“When you’re taking calls and the 911 line rings, you identify the location and type of emergency and hit a button to send the call to a dispatcher, who sends the closest and most appropriate ambulance.

“Then you give first aid information to the caller. A card index gives us the first aid. If the caller says its chest pain, the computer screen advises trying to relax and reassure the patient, loosen clothing, and so on.

“People can be rude. They have no concept of time when they are waiting for an ambulance. Minutes seem like hours,” he said.

Jugglers and magicians

“We are the unseen middlemen between the person requiring the ambulance and the rest of the medical system. We are the lightning rods.



“People have no concept of time when they are waiting for an ambulance. Minutes seem like hours,” says ambulance dispatcher Dennis McKaig.

Canapress photo – S. Martin

Nurses and doctors wonder why it takes so long; crews wonder why they can’t get a break. We’re jugglers and magicians.”

Ironically, what he likes best about the work tops Sue’s hate list: the 12-hour shifts and flexible schedule. “There’s a fair amount of time off.”

And what he likes least are the stress times – “the multi-incident calls, when too many come in at once, when we are overwhelmed. You hope there isn’t another call because you don’t have an ambulance to send.”

Dennis also has to rearrange ambulances to provide maximum coverage. “Every time you move an ambulance, you have to look and see if you have to move another to cover the population.”

Dennis’s dispatch operation is the second stop for 911 calls – they have already been screened to determine an ambulance is required.

“We also take routine bookings, and you can get three 911 calls while you are taking one booking. It’s the ultimate in multi-tasking.” ▲

‘OPSEU had a high profile and a good name.’

– Sue McSheffrey

OPSEU’s first merger:

New members, a clear focus, a stronger voice

Randy Robinson photo

As they say, it’s an ill wind that blows no good.

Because the ill wind of the Ontario Tory government’s attack on public sector unions was in large part responsible for blowing new energy and about 2,300 new members into OPSEU.

It happened Nov. 1, when the Association of Allied Health Professionals: Ontario merged with OPSEU.

Sue McSheffrey is a physiotherapist at the Renfrew Community Care Access Centre. She was elected chair of OPSEU’s Community Health Care Professionals Division last fall.

The government’s anti-union stand was one of the driving forces behind the Allied merger, she said. “We wanted to be part of a stronger voice to fight the policy changes.

“We scouted around and did a lot of homework as to who would be the best fit as a union, and OPSEU was at the head of the field.

“OPSEU represented employees very similar to ourselves. It had a high profile and a good name. When



Sue McSheffrey

we talked to OPSEU members they were very satisfied with the quality and level of service.

“Then the courtship began, we went to a few dances together, and the board of AAHP:O was firmly behind it.” When the merger was put to Allied members, the vote was more than 80 per cent in favour.

Sue, now president of Local 481, was on strike at the time of the merger. “I went from carrying an AAHP:O picket sign to an OPSEU one. We felt first-hand the support from OPSEU. All the Region 4 board members joined

our lines. We had cheques and good wishes from locals all across Ontario.

“It was fast immersion in OPSEU!”

The transition was smooth, Sue said. “I was elected chair of my sector, which puts me on the Health Care Divisional Council.

“I find all of this exciting. We need to have a single voice speaking for health care workers.”

Marg LaForge, a social worker at the Sudbury Community Care Access Centre, was Allied’s last president. “We didn’t want to see our members left

by Katie FitzRandolph

'If we don't work together as workers, across Ontario, we're going to be decimated.'

– Marg LaForge

Canapress photo – J. Lightfoot jr.



Marg LaForge

without any union in some of the hospital mergers where 'no union' was on the ballot."

"OPSEU understood us. And I think the time was ripe for OPSEU too; its health care members were looking for a clearer voice," Marg said.

"We've been made welcome in the union and OPSEU has a bigger voice. There is more money to educate us as workers in a union setting and there is an emphasis on the education of workers.

"It may be nice to sit back and let 'the union' represent you, but members will see the role they can play themselves, and that's really important. We'll be educated to look after more things on our own. We'll have a stronger, union-type voice, with our own stewards. I think it's exciting."

Marg has liked her contact with "the bigger union."

"It's nice to see that so many of the concerns and interests are the same," she said. She was delighted with reports on the 'Network for Better Contracts (*see BPS leaders, Page 2*). "If we don't work together as workers, across Ontario, we're going to be decimated."

For Sue McSheffrey, the biggest difference is one of scale. "We used to talk to [Allied executive director] Catherine Bowman on a daily basis, so it's a question of finding your way in a large organization.

"But the resources that are available are amazing once you know where to look and who to ask. There is a lot available from pay equity to collective agreement research and grievance research. I love it."

Catherine Bowman is now OPSEU's

supervisor of health care. It's a new position to support a more cohesive voice for health care workers – both within the union and to the Ontario community beyond. It encompasses members in the Broader Public Service who work in ambulance services, community health care, hospital paramedical workers (technologists, therapists, dietitians and others), health care support, and long-term care facilities.

"We'll be co-ordinating campaigns common to the five health care divisions and issues around regulated health professions which cross division lines. I see us as a forum for sharing information and helping to move ideas through OPSEU," Catherine said. It will also enhance

OPSEU's presence in bodies like the Ontario Health Coalition.

In the process, Allied found a comfortable home in a larger union community, "with an effective voice for our issues and the things that are important to us, as well as access to the resources of a large organization."

Chris Madill, a lab technologist and member of OPSEU's executive board, welcomes the new Allied members.

"We want OPSEU to be THE union for health care workers in this province, and the merger enhances that position," she said.

"There are a great many lab workers who have no union to represent them, both in hospitals and in private labs. And there are still many hospital merger votes ahead under Bill 136. The Allied merger puts us in stronger position to reach out to them," Chris said. ▲

What makes a workplace safe?

People who care

Canapress photo – T. Andkilde



Uptight truckers: A new job hazard

Tension has risen in the trucking industry in the last decade.

Just-in-time delivery has tightened truckers' deadlines and nerves. Higher fines for traffic act violations, combined with possible vehicle impoundment and removal of licence plates

have upped the ante. Truckers risk losing their vehicles and their livelihood.

"When we find a problem with their vehicle or documents, truckers can be agitated. Adding to the danger, a significant number coming from the U.S. have guns," explained Ministry of

Transportation (MTO) enforcement officer Tom Grimes, president of Local 140.

Tom works out of the Windsor weigh scale, enforcing the rules of vehicle safety, load

safety, qualification of drivers, dangerous cargoes and so on.

Trucker tension has translated into a safety problem for officers. Assaults were rising, and studies showed “a high (and rising) probability of confrontation,” he said.

In the Windsor area, the MTO’s radio was set to the same wavelength as the truckers. “If we called for help, they heard us.”

Tom had to file safety complaints with the Ministry of Labour to get action. The process was slow, but it worked. MTO

ran a risk mitigation analysis for MTO’s vehicle enforcement officers and driver examiners. It was completed in 1998, but Tom

had to fight almost a year through the Ministry of Labour to get copies. The resulting report made about 100 recommendations, many involving training.

The Labour ministry wrote six orders, three dealing with the report and three requiring the MTO to cooperate.

“Now we are on an independent radio channel that defaults to the Ontario Provincial Police channel.

“We’re getting self-defence training from qualified instructors. It began in November and should be complete in February. We’ve got the tools – handcuffs, batons and vests, with training in their use. And we finally have recognition as peace officers,” Tom said.

“The training includes handling tense situations: talking-down skills; defusing confrontation with irate drivers or ones who are getting physical; and how to spot trouble brewing and tone it down before anything happens.”

A joint MTO advisory working group on officer safety started last summer and continues to push the issues. Linked to the Ministry Employer-Employee Relations Committee, it has OPSEU enforcement staff and program managers. And it’s working its way through the safety issues raised in the risk mitigation analysis.

“The communication questions has been a safety worry for 19 years,” Tom said. ▲

Trucker tension has translated into a safety problem for officers. Assaults were rising, and studies showed “a high (and rising) probability of confrontation.”

– Tom Grimes

Big stink raises health questions

Edite Pontes and her colleagues were hit on the nose with a health and safety concern last year.

To be more specific, it was fumes from carpet and tile replacement, painting and other renovations at Surrey Place Centre in central Toronto.

“Staff had concerns about the smells and gases.”

Edite, treasurer of Local 511, is a developmental therapist at the centre, which provides resources for young people with developmental handicaps.

“I’m not an expert on chemicals, lifting and construction,” she explained. “They were supposed to be non-toxic, but I don’t know.”

So Edite called on OPSEU’s health and safety staff for advice.

She got the descriptions of the chemicals being used, and passed them on to health and safety officer Lisa McCaskell, but by that time, most of the work had been completed.

“It seems they were using appropriate materials,” Edite said.

“Management responded to the concerns. Some staff worked in other locations away from the fumes and smells, and others worked at home during the renovations.

“I think they were accommodated reasonably well. People wanted their voice heard, and management responded appropriately,” she said. ▲

What makes a workplace safe?

He was steamed so students wouldn't be



Steve Daynes photo

Norm Rosenitsch, Local 558's treasurer and health and safety rep for Centennial College's Progress Avenue campus, was teaching an evening class when it hit him.

The college had never done a fire drill for night students.

The union raised this with the college in 1997.

"We have the official fire plan that you file with the fire department," he said. "But it really only covers the daytime, and the college has two shifts of students. Night school has a totally different group, and night school has no fire plan, no wardens, nothing."

Closer investigation showed even the daytime fire plans were outdated. "Some wardens no longer worked at the college; others worked at different campuses. An addition had not been included. There were lots of flaws, and we were getting nowhere on the night school," Norm said.

"It's not so much the heat and flames that kill in a fire; it's the fumes and smoke."

So Norm grieved that his health and safety was endangered by the lack of a fire plan. He wanted a plan and a fire drill for night classes.

'The college didn't want to stand in front of an arbitrator and argue that it didn't care about the lives of night school students.'

– Norm Rosenitsch

"We could have 900 people in the building at night, and they spend less time on campus and are less aware of exits and hallways."

The grievance worked. Centennial agreed to hold one fire drill in the day and one in the evening at each of its locations in each academic year. The first ever night class fire drill was held Nov. 25.

"It took two and a half years. In the end, the college didn't want to stand in front of an arbitrator and argue that it didn't care about the lives of night school students and staff," Norm said. ▲

Life-saving equipment hard on paramedics

Tim Luesby is an ambulance paramedic in the Ottawa-Carleton Regional Ambulance Service, a certified worker health and safety representative, and secretary of Local 413.

He's in the middle of a work refusal over the increased weight of equipment required by paramedics.

"It's important equipment and I understand the need for it, but there has to be a way that doesn't endanger the paramedics themselves," Tim said.

The paramedics have to carry a large duffel bag containing medication, intravenous equipment, airways, a defibrillator and heart monitoring equipment. It's another 61 pounds on top of the equipment paramedics already carry, and it is dangerous for the workers, he said. A number of his colleagues complained about the load, the weight, and the number of pieces of equipment. Some felt threatened when they raised their concerns, he said.

A Ministry of Labour health and safety inspector rejected his claim, because the ambulance industry has no standards for lifting. "He sympathized, but he couldn't issue an order because you can't violate a non-existent standard."

So Tim appealed, and his case will come before the Ontario Labour Relations Board shortly.

"We have to bring all this equipment to the patient. The only thing that doesn't go right to the patient is the stretcher, and it's as close as possible without taking it up a serious flight of stairs. But if we can't bring the stretcher to the patient, we have to bring other equipment for moving the person – like a stairchair or a scoop stretcher.

"And we still have to bring the normal

'I understand the need for it, but there has to be a way that doesn't endanger the paramedics.'

– Tim Luesby



Canapress photo – M. Pinder

equipment – backboard, cervical collars, burn kits, first aid kit, possibly an obstetrical kit.

"And, of course, we have to carry the patient as well as all the equipment back to the ambulance for the emergency run to the hospital."

Tim suggested an additional person on the paramedic crew, possibly a training or junior position, to help carry the load. He urged the Ministry of Health to look into lighter, more compact equipment. "There must be new tools coming out."

So far, the employer has not resolved the issues.

The Ottawa Carleton Regional Ambulance Service is provincially run. The local includes another four nearby ambulance services that fall under the Broader Public Service, a dispatch centre, mechanics and support staff. ▲

OPSEU

in action

Building respect; Building a local

Once a month, about a dozen people sit down at Huronia Regional Centre to solve problems. Six belong to Local 323's executive committee, headed by president Laurie Chapman. The rest are managers.

It's the Local Employer-Employee Relations Committee (the "LERC" for jargon-lovers).

Issues arrive in a variety of ways: policy changes from OPSEU or her employer (the Ministry of Community and Social Services) and workplace problems. Most come from stewards who bring them to the Local Executive Committee (LEC).

"We schedule our LEC and LERC meetings about 10 days apart. Stewards bring things to the LEC meetings they haven't been able to solve. We decide which ones go to the LERC."

What kinds of things have been sorted out?

Staff morale

"Several events hit Huronia in 1999 causing morale to plummet. When the nearby Edgar Occupational Centre closed in March, 46 Edgar staff 'bumped' to jobs at Huronia, displacing 46 people. Then in the fall, another 28 positions were made surplus," Laurie said.

"Staff weren't happy. There was the adjustment to new people and the loss of old friends. We had management changes. Policies were being changed. People were being closely monitored and watched.

"We put the morale problems on the agenda and we've been working with management to make things better."

As a first step, the monitoring ended.

The second success was regaining the popular "float days," lost three years ago in a

scheduling change. Under the old compressed workweek of 12-hour days, staff worked 84 hours every two weeks. Over six weeks, they accumulated 12 extra hours, which they could take off as a float day. Loss of those days had created unhappiness.

Staffing levels:

"Stewards have raised problems when a specific supervisor decides to run an area short-staffed rather than call someone in on overtime."

Benefits for unclassified staff:

When an OPSEU arbitration award changed the rules for benefits for unclassified (casual) staff, Laurie took the award to her LERC. "It meant a lot of retroactive pay for many of our members. We demanded, and got, a list of the payouts, and who was getting them and when. The LERC lets us monitor how central union arbitrations are applied to our members."

For OPSEU members working for the Ontario government, the LERC is the first step to solving problems. When things can't be settled locally, they get referred to the Ministry level – the Ministry Employer-Employee Relations Committee or "MERC."

A variety of names

In the colleges and the broader public service, similar committees operate under different names – College Consultative Committee, Labour Management Committee and so on. All offer a forum for resolving the day-to-day problems that arise at work.

"Our members can see the union working to

make things better. It makes the local stronger,” Laurie said.

“I can’t recall sending anything to the MERC that could have been resolved locally.”

For Laurie, the process works because her management learned it was good to resolve issues. “If we can talk about things and get them on the table and understand the other side, it’s easier to deal with. Problems don’t get buried.”

That’s what it’s all about, according to Pam Smith. She’s president of Local 455, a former member of the MERC for Community and Social Services, and current chair of the income maintenance division.

About five years ago she worked with a joint committee – which included now president Leah Casselman – to develop a training package for LERCs.

“It has exercises in solving problems, and recognizing the other side’s issues,” Pam said.

“There are interesting dynamics. When the training starts you see the line in the sand, and by the end of it, there is respect for the other side and its position. You don’t have to agree, but you should respect each other.”

For Pam, LERCs are the backbone of the local. Why? “Because we can circumvent barriers and solve problems. We don’t have to wait for a grievance and that lengthy process. A good LERC will improve staff morale.

“Members see there is someone who cares and is working toward a resolution. A good LERC also flags issues that the central union might not otherwise notice.”

Even though Laurie’s LERC meets once a month, she doesn’t wait if she sees trouble. “We talk to the managers, human resources staff, and the administrator outside the LERC.” Even if that solves the problem, the resolution gets recorded in the LERC minutes.

That record is then shared when the minutes are posted, and members can see their union in action. ▲



Bill Majesky photo

‘Our members can see the union working to make things better. It makes the local stronger.’

– Laurie Chapman

by Katie FitzRandolph

No private jails

Sharon Dion and Al Donaldson: Community and union are working together.



Canapress photo – J. Lyle

Hometown Ontario fights back

When OPSEU members went to a public meeting in Penetanguishene this December, they were looking for help. Ontario Corrections Minister Rob Sampson had just announced that the town's 1,200-bed superjail would be contracted out to a private operator, and they wanted to stop him.

"The U.S experience with private jails is one long story of riots, murders, corruption, and greed," said Barry Scanlon, chair of the OPSEU Employer-Employee Relations Committee in the Ministry of Corrections.

"Privatization destroys good professional jobs with decent wages, benefits, and pensions just so corrections corporations can send our tax money to head offices in Tennessee or Florida or England. We knew we had to fight."

Turns out the town was way ahead of the union.

The 7,000 residents of Penetanguishene live on the south shore of Georgian Bay, sharing the natural beauty with their sister city, Midland (population 16,000). When OPSEU members told the two towns about the plan to privatize, they knew what to do; they'd done it before. They passed resolutions opposing privatization and called out to others for help.

"There's a lot of concern from [OPSEU]

members in corrections and the community,” says Al Donaldson, president of Local 307 at the Oak Ridge Division of the Penetanguishene Mental Health Centre. “They’re getting in the papers and consulting with local business people. They’re well informed, and they’re irate, and so they should be. This government is lying to them.”

Superjail flip-flop!

The Mike Harris government first talked about privatizing superjails in Penetang and Lindsay in 1997. Faced with irate local citizens and an approaching election, they backed off. Corrections Minister Bob Runciman said there were “too many unanswered questions about safety” with private jails.

With the election over and a new minister at the helm, the government flip-flopped. Local residents sprang into action.

“Someone is lying,” says Sharon Dion, who runs a second-hand

clothing store in Penetanguishene. “I believe the government is not being truthful. My tax dollars are being used to build that facility and then some company is coming in to run it.

“If they want to make a profit, then rehabilitation standards will be low,” she says. “They have to make money – they want repeat offenders. They want to fill 1,200 beds.”

Put a CAPP on it

Dion’s shop is headquarters for Citizens Against Private Prisons (CAPP), a group she helped start. She’s busy these days, running a postcard campaign, fielding calls from reporters, handing out “NO PRIVATE JAIL” buttons, and planning a public forum.

The forum, held as *Our Ontario* went to

press, was co-sponsored by CAPP and the John Howard Society. Speakers came from the Elizabeth Fry Society, Penetanguishene and Midland councils, and OPSEU. Special guests were journalist and former federal prison inmate Rosie Rowbotham and Stephen Nathan of London, England, editor of the influential Prison Privatization Report International.

Corrections boss Rob Sampson declined an invitation, citing “other commitments.”

“Maybe he thinks he’s giving us a cooling off period,” Dion said before the meeting, “but we’re not cooling off.”

While the minister may cluck and have feathers, at least he hasn’t had to face Penetanguishene residents like local Tory MPP Garfield Dunlop did in January.

“It was the poorest display I’ve ever seen put on by a politician,” said Al Donaldson. “He was totally out of touch with his constituents and totally out of touch with the situation of the superjail. He was reading from clippings and notes that somebody prepared for him, and he was just

bombarded by the townspeople.”

“Keep it professional, keep it public”

People in Penetanguishene are not afraid of dangerous offenders. The maximum-security Oak Ridge Division holds murderers and other violent offenders who are too mentally ill for federal prison.

“I feel fully safe, because it’s run very professionally,” says Dion.

The new superjail needs to be just as safe, says Donaldson. “We want the jail run by professional individuals from OPSEU who are trained and experienced to provide the service.”

“Everyone who is a civil servant has to realize their jobs could be privatized,” says Dion. “I want this to be a province-wide concern because this could happen to them.”▲

Campaign spreads

It’s not just Penetanguishene that’s fighting the sell-off of correctional services. Nobody in Lindsay seems to want a private jail either. At press time, Waterloo, Collingwood, Orillia, and Cobourg had already passed motions against private correctional services, as had several rural townships. More will do so as OPSEU members keep making presentations to municipal councils.

Meanwhile, work to fight the privatization of hospital escorts and young offenders facilities is picking up speed.

Four NUPGE scholarships are worth \$1,000 each

The National Union of Public and General Employees offers four scholarships for members' children (including foster children) starting full-time post-secondary education in a public institution in 2000-2001.

Winners are based on a 750-1,000-word essay. The topics are:

Tommy Douglas – How Tommy Douglas' life contributed to making Canada a more just and equitable society.

Terry Fox (for an applicant with disabilities) – The importance of quality public service in enhancing the quality of life of people with disabilities.

Aboriginal (for an Aboriginal Canadian applicant) – The importance of

quality public service in enhancing the quality of life of Aboriginal Canadians.

Visible minority (for a visible minority applicant) – The importance of quality public services in enhancing

the quality of life of visible minorities.

Full details can be had from NUPGE, 15 Auriga Drive, Nepean, Ont. K2E 1B7 (www.nupge.ca).

Pension trustees needed

OPSEU needs two alternate trustees to the Hospitals of Ontario Pension Plan. Alternate trustees attend meetings in the absence of the appointed trustee and may attend all meetings, with voice and no vote. Trustees must be able to absorb a lot of written material and to effectively represent the interests of plan members and the union within the legislative requirements placed on trustees. OPSEU provides periodic training. Candidates must be active HOOPP members. The term expires Dec. 31, 2002.

Full details are available from the Membership Benefits Department at OPSEU, 100 Lesmill Rd., Toronto, Ont. M3B 3P8. Applications, outlining experience and achievements, must reach the same address by March 31, 2000. You can fax them to: (416) 443-0553.

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