

Greening OPSEU

OPSEU members want our union to be part of the solution to environmental problems. We want a green union, greener workplaces, and cleaner, healthier communities.

What does it mean: “greening our union?”

At the 2005 OPSEU Convention, delegates approved a motion: Working for a Healthier and Safer Environment. A three person “Green Team” was formed to bring a union-wide environmental action plan to the 2006 Convention. It took time, but OPSEU’s green plan is now taking shape.

“Greening could mean anything from energy reduction, to car pooling, to growing native plants on union property,” says Patty Rout, the union’s first vice-president/treasurer.

It means ensuring union policy is green policy. It also means an energy policy that cuts greenhouse gases by 80 per cent by 2040 (adopted in May 2008). And it means recycling where possible and practicable; using public, piped water in the workplace, not private, bottled water; and making fair trade, organic, shade-grown coffee available at OPSEU events, just to name three examples.

Another key is a system of Green Stewards in the membership, communicating with OPSEU, with each other and with all members. When bargaining, we have to consider negotiating for sustainable workplaces — for our survival.

Environmental education, public campaigns, green jobs, even greener pensions, video and web-conferencing instead of travelling are among other ways to ‘go green.’

Gary Shaul, a member activist from Region 5, has been working at OPSEU to make the plan a reality. “It means thinking globally, but acting locally,” says Shaul, who started a Green Union blog at <http://greeningopseu.blogspot.com/>.

Read more about greening the union at:
www.opseu.org/notices/greeningopseu.htm



Photo: Rick Janson

OPSEU member Gary Shaul re-introducing native plants to OPSEU head office property.

Courage, heart and determination win Grey Bruce Health Unit strike

David Cox

What does it take to win a strike?

After ten weeks on the picket line, Local 276, representing the valiant office and clerical staff of the Grey Bruce Health Unit, have the answer: It takes courage, heart, and determination, and this group of 27 women had this and more.

The members emerged triumphant with a three-year agreement, including wage increases totalling 12 per cent.

The long and bitter strike brought out a great sense of solidarity and overwhelming support from the communities of Grey and Bruce Counties, where 27 OPSEU women worked to counter an employer policy of spending freely on buildings and top brass, while pinching pennies on front-line staff.

The strike began May 1, and ended with the signing of a three-year tentative deal in the wee hours, July 10. The contract included wage increases of three, one, three, one and four per cent. The final increase will come Nov. 1, 2009.

Members of the office and clerical unit work in many programs at the unit including vaccine preventable diseases, rabies, bird flu, West Nile, safe water, food safety, environment,

sexual health, immunization clinics and many other health related programs that protect the health and well-being of Grey and Bruce residents.

“It was a tough battle, but we saw such tremendous support from the community,” said Linda Owens, a member of the bargaining team and the voice of the Local during the strike. “We had such total solidarity within the unit, and many local individuals, businesses and unions went out of their way to help us out.”

Tremendous morale

OPSEU President Warren (Smokey) Thomas, who visited the picket lines several times, commented on the tremendous morale of the striking members. “They fought long and hard to achieve this victory,” he said. “My hat is off to the bargaining team and all of the members who did what they had to do to achieve this settlement.”

Patty Rout, the union’s First Vice-President/Treasurer, was in Owen Sound when the settlement was reached and was on hand to congratulate the workers. “A lot of strikes are won due to sheer determination,” she said.

The strike was primarily about wage rates. The members wanted to catch up to workers doing similar work for related employers in neighbouring counties and for other clerical workers in Grey and Bruce. “The gains made in this strike will be felt by these members now and in every future contract,” said Rout.

It was a long and difficult fight, with the union holding out longer than the employer could. It became a matter of principle.

As workers walked the lines, the union bombarded the local radio airwaves and community newspapers with ads highlighting the employer’s spending on top administration, creating new positions and constructing a sparkling new waterfront building. And a huge Local 276 billboard strategically facing strike headquarters, the picket lines, the employer’s offices and even the local Tim Hortons announced “We’re worth it!”

Morale remained high. After two months, the team was called back to the table only to receive an unacceptable offer from the employer. “The employer offered to change the extra one per cent in year three of the contract from a half year to a whole year. That’s one half of one per cent or about \$190.00 per person,” said Owens.

This offer was rejected by the team, and spiked by 77 per cent of the striking workers in a vote. The response of the bargaining team was to step up fundraising, requesting help from the Ontario Federation of Labour affiliates and Labour Councils across the province.

A week later, the employer came back with a better offer. Still the employer still wanted to lay off ten of the employees. This concession would not appear in the final deal. All of the employees returned to work as part of the deal.

“We demonstrated in that first vote they could not starve us out — that we had the resources of our union, our community and the labour movement behind us,” Owens said.

www.opseu.org/bps/health/hospital/

Photos courtesy Wendy Williams and Local 276



Members of Local 276 travelled to Ottawa to make their views heard as the Liberal Provincial Council met in June.



Grace Tomsett, Linda Owens and Raye Barrow: Local 276 members.



OPSEU members meet with then Minister of Health and Long-Term Care George Smitherman.