

April 11, 2001

MOE clarifies that employees are free to participate in Inquiry

The Ministry of Environment (MOE) has confirmed the right of employees to participate in the Walkerton Inquiry “without fear of retribution”.

District Manager Bruce Hancock outlined the ministry’s position in an April 10 memo [\[link\]](#) to Peterborough MOE staff:

“Ministry employees are free to attend at [sic] local Town Hall meetings of the Inquiry and formal public hearings, and have the right to make submissions to the Inquiry, the right to provide the Inquiry and its counsel with information and assistance, and the right to assist OPSEU at the Inquiry without fear of retribution. Ministry employees who choose to participate in the work of the Inquiry are protected from any reprisals by legislated “whistle-blower protection”.

The memo came the day before the Inquiry held a town hall meeting in Peterborough to hear local concerns about drinking water.

In an April 10 letter to OPSEU [\[link\]](#), the government’s lawyer confirmed that the position outlined in the Hancock memo applies ministry-wide:

“We are in fact dealing with a matter that arose in Peterborough...Further, should matters of this type arise in other offices, we are certainly prepared to reconsider a Ministry-wide statement by a senior person in the MOE. Hopefully we will not find it necessary to deal with this type of situation in the future.”

This clarification of the government’s position came at the request of OPSEU. The union heard that Peterborough staff were discouraged from participating in the upcoming town hall. OPSEU immediately approached the government with our concerns and required that the MOE set the record straight.

OPSEU will remain vigilant to any signs that our members are being discouraged from speaking out. The union will hold the MOE to its word that employees will not face retribution for participating in the Inquiry.

Local 308 president Steve Clancy, a correctional officer, made a presentation [\[link\]](#) to the Inquiry’s town hall in Peterborough last night on behalf of local MOE members. Clancy told Justice O’Connor that notwithstanding the clarifications, “employees still feel concerned.”

O’Connor told the town hall that he encourages all ministry employees to provide their input to the Inquiry.

Inquiry told “overwhelming challenge is workload”

Local 308 president Steve Clancy told the Inquiry’s town hall in Peterborough Tuesday that for MOE staff the “overwhelming challenge is workload”.

“Due to every-changing regulations and legislative requirements, proper training and direction from management is often convoluted and grossly inadequate,” said Clancy in his presentation. “The combination of these elements is a very real source of stress and frustration for staff who really want to do the right thing.”

Justice O’Connor can expect to hear workload referred to repeatedly at the town hall meetings and at the hearings in Walkerton.

MOE hydrogeologist Steve Kistoth told O’Connor at the town hall in Kitchener-Waterloo March 22 “...that our staffing resources are very limited under a very heavy workload.” Click on http://208.38.27.85/trans/Walk_Mar_22_01/index.htm for a transcript of Kistoth’s presentation.

The next town hall meeting is in North Bay on May 1. Town halls are also planned for Windsor, Thunder Bay, Kingston, Toronto and Ottawa. To make a presentation, please contact Megan Park, Campaigns Officer, 1-800-268-7376 ext. 207 or email mpark@opseu.org.

Walkerton presentation honours ‘public service in the highest tradition’

OPSEU President Leah Casselman honoured members of locals for their collective response to last year’s fatal outbreak of E. coli poisoning in Walkerton at the union’s convention April 6.

In an emotional presentation, she commended members and retirees from the Ministries of the Environment, Health and Natural Resources, from the Ontario Clean Water Agency, from hospitals in Walkerton, Owen Sound and London, from the local Health Unit, and from air and land ambulance services.

The massive response required to deal with the thousands of sick people and to restore clean water was an example of public service at it’s best, Casselman said.

“All in all it was a gigantic team effort, with members going far beyond the call of duty to restore clean drinking water to Walkerton. People dropped whatever else they were doing and moved in to help out.”

She also commended locals who gave donations to the Walkerton Fund.

A special award has been created to recognize all locals and workplaces who helped out. To receive a certificate for your workplace, please contact Megan Park at 1-800-268-7376 ext. 207 or e-mail mpark@opseu.org.

The presentation to convention included a moving tribute to Local 275 member Betty Trushinski, an employee of the Walkerton Hospital who died in the tragedy. Local 275 president Karen Passmore described Trushinski as a healthy 55 year-old bubbly and energetic person who enjoyed life to the fullest.

“Please remember Betty as the wonderful person that she was”, said Passmore.

Concluding the presentation, OPSEU General Counsel Tim Hadwen outlined what the union is doing to ensure the Walkerton horror is never repeated.

Watch for the full presentation to be posted on OPSEU’s website in the coming days.

Hearings resume Thursday

The Inquiry will resume hearings Thursday examining whether government policies contributed to the tragedy in Walkerton.

The former Assistant Deputy Minister of Operations Division at the MOE, Jim Merritt, will testify Thursday. Merritt will outline the Ministry’s set-up, the various re-organizations that took place in the ‘90s and the Ministry’s relationship with other ministries and municipalities.

Next week, the Inquiry will hear from MOE managers Tim Little, Robert Shaw and Jim Mahoney on inspections. Shaw will also provide evidence on the Delivery Strategies and staff reductions.

The Inquiry will call witnesses to discuss investigations and enforcement the week of April 23. To date, the witnesses have not been named.

OPSEU has full standing in this phase of the Inquiry. The union is in the midst of preparing its cross-examination of the witnesses listed above.

How to get in touch with us

To get on our e-mail list or talk to us about the Inquiry, contact Megan Park at 1-800-268-7376 ext. 207 or mpark@opseu.org.

Check regularly www.opseu.org/walkerton/index.htm and the official Inquiry website at www.walkertoninquiry.com.

Original authorized for distribution by Leah Casselman, president.