

NEWS FROM THE FRONT LINES

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OMERS pension autonomy achieved

For 30 straight days early in the new year, CUPE Ontario achieved what many would have considered impossible — putting workers' pensions in the headlines, on the radio talk shows and in coffee shop conversations right across the province.

The fight over Bill 206 was the culmination a decade-long campaign to win autonomy in the OMERS pension plan. By the time the bill was passed in the Ontario legislature, CUPE members in OMERS had won, for the first time, the ability to put pensions on the bargaining table, removed a cap on benefit improvements, brought paramedics closer to the pension benefits enjoyed by other public safety occupations, and got government agreement to introduce special legislation guaranteeing a review of the new governance structure. For a full summary of the achievements, prepared by CUPE Ontario's legal counsel, visit cupe.on.ca.

Next steps for improving OMERS include ensuring that the government drafts a "CUPE bill" according to the agreement made in February, developing policies and protocols for CUPE representatives on OMERS governing bodies and developing a bargaining strategy for pension improvements.

Strengthening our union: CUPE women encouraged to sign up for provincial task force

CUPE Ontario has issued a call for "expressions of interest" from women who would like to be involved in the work of the national women's task force.

Delegates to the 2005 national convention voted to create the task force to explore ways to make CUPE more inclusive of the full diversity of women at all levels of our union. The task force held its first meeting in late February.

There are two Ontario representatives on the task force with staff support. There is room, however, for much more involvement by CUPE women in local women's organizing activities and on a provincial women's task force approved March 8, 2006 by the CUPE Ontario executive board.

The provincial task force will have 10 members reflecting equity, jurisdictional representation and regional diversity. The deadline for expressions of interest is April 15, 2006. To download an expression of interest form, visit cupe.on.ca.

Code Blue for Child Care

Shortly after being sworn in as Canada's new Prime Minister Stephen Harper cancelled the federal-provincial child care agreements and with them the foundation of Canada's newest social program. Nearly \$4 billion dollars in federal child care funding is on the chopping block. In Ontario it could mean the loss of the Best Start Plan and 25,000 desperately needed child care spaces. We cannot stand by and let this happen.

More than 27,000 Canadians have already signed onto an open letter to Harper. CUPE has pledged to get another 50,000 signatures. Add yours at buildchildcare.ca and pass the link to as many other friends, family members and co-workers as you can. Our children are counting on you!

McGuinty budget provides nothing new for provincial infrastructure

"There is nothing in this new McGuinty budget that gives us any comfort," CUPE Ontario Secretary-Treasurer Brian O'Keefe said on March 23.

"The Liberal government continues to build the province's infrastructure on P3s – private-public partnerships – rather than public ownership and operation of public services.

"Except for municipalities, there are virtually no new announcements for public services.

"They have extra money in 05/06 and are putting it forward as their new spending in 06/07 but in reality they are putting half of it in this trust fund for subway expansion with no time-lines or blueprints for its spending. They could have used the money this year to improve public services," O'Keefe said.

"Basically there is nothing for the workers of the province but there are further promises to private sector investors and developers

" At the end of it all, Ontarians can't expect anything until just before the next provincial election – and then not much."

Tuition fee increase a tax on working families

The McGuinty government's tuition fee increases will tax working families and increase pressure on student workers, especially graduate students.

"Just weeks ago, Dalton McGuinty was standing in the legislature to proclaim his government as the most labour-friendly in years," said CUPE Ontario President Sid Ryan. "With friends like that — who bring in tuition increases far greater than any income increases anyone has had — working families don't need enemies."

CUPE represents about 20,000 university workers, including students who work as teaching assistants, graders and lecturers.

"Universities are going to be paying with one hand and taking away with the other," said Janice Folk-Dawson, chair of the CUPE Ontario university workers coordinating committee. "We need a real plan for, and commitment to, improving post-secondary education, not just shifting funding from the public purse to private pocketbooks."

"Instead of undoing the damage of chronic underfunding and restoring access to post-secondary education, this government is choosing to continue the damage," Ryan said. "Over the past several weeks, the provincial Liberal government has been steamrolling its regressive policies over Ontarians. Everything from childcare to health care, pensions, and now tuition fees, is on the agenda.

"The end result is that Ontario families are going to suffer."

Hamilton joins more than 50,000 Ontarians in saying no to privatized P3 hospitals

Hamilton voters cast close to 28,000 votes on Saturday, March 25 in favour of keeping their hospitals 100 per cent publicly funded, financed, owned, administered and operated. Out of 28,659 votes cast, 97.7% were in favour of public hospitals.

"More than 28,000 Hamilton residents cared enough about this issue to get out and vote in this voluntary referendum," said Hamilton Health Coalition co-chair Lois Boggs. "Hundreds of volunteers staffed polling stations all over the community to give residents an opportunity to have a say. People thanked us for doing this and expressed their deep concern about the privatization of hospital buildings and services."

CUPE members were out in force throughout the campaign. Hamilton locals collected funds to run radio ads encouraging people to vote for public hospitals. CUPE 4800 even printed lawn signs. On the day of the vote itself, CUPE members from Niagara, Oshawa and Toronto made the trek to join their sisters and brothers to staff polling stations.

"We now have an astounding 50,000 votes against P3 privatization of our hospitals from four communities across Ontario," said Natalie Mehra, director of the Ontario Health Coalition. "We are gearing up for the next several community-wide votes very soon. We will continue city-by-city to make sure that Ontarians know McGuinty plans to break his election promise to stop the P3 privatization of our hospitals."

New user fees, more private service delivery coming with McGuinty health care plan

Results of a recent public opinion poll conducted by Vector Research show that 76 per cent of Ontarians are worried about new health service user fees and that they won't be able to afford needed medical care.

Ontarians are right to be concerned: the McGuinty government's Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs) scheme will spawn new out of pocket costs for patients, say four health care unions critical of the proposed new health care delivery model.

The Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA), the Service Employees International Union Local 1001 (SEIU Local 1001), the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) believe the plan will dismantle the public health system and facilitate increased private delivery of care, more user fees and increased travel time and expenses for patients.

Results of the poll, conducted about a month before the LHINs legislation was passed, showed 82 per cent of Ontarians know little or nothing about the LHINs.

Bill 36 outlines the Liberals' clear intention to merge and transfer clinical and support services out of public, not-for profit hospitals and into the "community sector" – including long-term care homes and new private clinics. The scope of services covered publicly in hospitals, is more comprehensive than in "the community."

Drugs and medical devices are key areas where new user fees may be introduced as health services are transferred out of hospitals. Patients could potentially pay for entire services out of pocket, which is permitted under the LHINs legislation. And they will incur new travel costs to access health services that have been moved out of their community and centralized in one location to cut the government's health care costs.

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Windsor child care workers join CUPE

Child care workers from the Come and Play Day Nursery voted unanimously to become members of CUPE on March 8.

"Our new members will now benefit from being part of Canada's biggest union, representing the largest number of child care workers," said Laura Moore, CUPE national representative. "Child care workers deserve respect and recognition for the care they provide for our children."

CUPE advocates for quality, accessible child care, provided by dedicated professional workers in a not-for-profit environment. As the leading Canadian union in the child care sector, CUPE continues to wage successful public awareness campaigns on child care issues, including the fight against the federal conservative government's plan to abandon provincial child care agreements.

"Joining CUPE is the first step for child care workers to improve wages, benefits and working conditions," said Moore. "We are committed to helping child care workers by organizing non-unionized workers, so they can enjoy the full support and resources of CUPE."

Tentative settlement reached for teaching assistants and sessional lecturers at U of G

Following nearly 20 hours of mediation, CUPE 3913 and the University of Guelph reached a tentative settlement on March 31.

"It's been a long haul. We've been in negotiations since October 27 and the 12-member union team, despite all the obstacles, stayed the course and once again showed their commitment to getting a settlement," said Toni Xerri, the union's chief negotiator.

Both parties are legally bound to recommend the settlement to their principals.

CUPE 3913 represents more than 1,200 teaching assistants and sessional lecturers at the University of Guelph and is the largest trade union in the city.

Cutbacks at Davey Home will hurt residents

CUPE is calling on management at F.J. Davey Home nursing home in Sault Ste. Marie to stop cutting frontline services, after learning management is planning cutbacks and layoffs because of budget problems.

"Management is targeting frontline caregivers when we're already stretched to the limit," said Rebecca McLeish, CUPE 4685 president. "They are also violating our collective agreement and causing chaos at the home by flouting seniority provisions and due process in cutting hours." CUPE has filed grievances over the proposed cuts and the way management is proceeding. The union is also planning information pickets and protests to fight the cuts and lobby the provincial government for improved funding.

"There's not much difference between Dalton McGuinty and Mike Harris or Ernie Eves, if our seniors' care is still inadequately funded," said McLeish. "The recent provincial budget didn't do anything to alleviate the long-term care funding crunch – it's time for politicians to remember that they may one day find themselves in a nursing home, wishing they had implemented better funding to improve care when they were in office."