



Issues of recruitment  
and retention among  
frontline municipal workers:

## **THE CUPE ONTARIO PERSPECTIVE**



# BACKGROUND



In Spring 2024, CUPE Ontario and its Ontario Municipal Workers (OMW) committee commissioned a survey of CUPE members who work in Ontario's municipal sector.

Our survey supplements a similar one carried out by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario's (AMO), which has a Workforce Development Project underway to address issues of recruitment and retention in the municipal workforce.

The CUPE Ontario-OMW survey analysis offers valuable insights from the perspective of frontline unionized workers on a range of issues, including compensation, equity and diversity, levels of job satisfaction, and career opportunities. Crucially, the survey's results indicate that frontline municipal workforces across Ontario are affected by the challenges of attracting and keeping people in the jobs that make our towns and cities work.

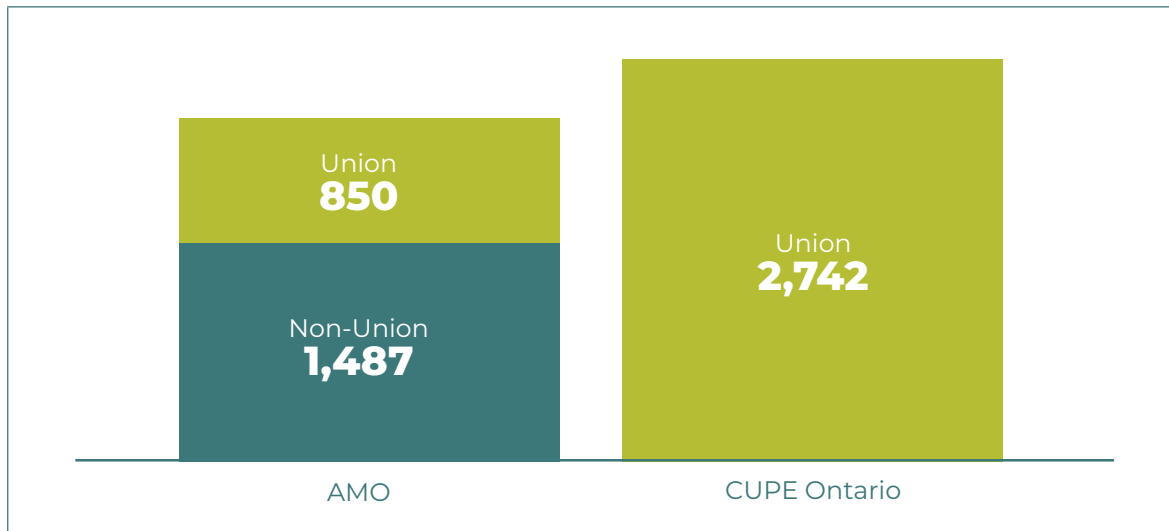
Through this survey, municipal locals and local leaders can learn more about what's on the minds of their members, draw on the results in collective bargaining, and work with municipal employers to make municipal jobs attractive and rewarding for the dedicated people who serve our communities.

## FAST FACTS ABOUT CUPE MUNICIPAL WORKERS IN ONTARIO

- CUPE Ontario and OMW represent 90,000 workers in the municipal sector.
- CUPE members represent 32% of all municipal workers in Ontario.
- CUPE municipal workers maintain our towns' and cities' roads, water and waste treatment facilities; provide administrative and technical services; deliver social services; maintain parks and recreation facilities; collect garbage and recycling; ensure public health; and provide many other services.

## CUPE Ontario surveyed over 3x the number of unionized workers to help inform recommendations

Responses to the AMO & CUPE Ontario Survey



### Comparison and Analysis of CUPE Ontario's Survey and AMO's Survey

While many questions were similar to the AMO survey, we added several additional questions to delve deeper into the unique challenges and concerns of front-line staff. This approach allowed us to gather more granular data on issues such as compensation, working conditions, and job satisfaction.

Our survey results largely aligned with AMO's findings, confirming the prevalence of recruitment and retention difficulties within the municipal sector. However, there were notable differences that highlight the importance of considering the perspectives of front-line workers.

For instance, our survey revealed a substantial level of dissatisfaction among front-line workers regarding compensation. Additionally, our members expressed reluctance to remain within the municipal sector again citing concerns of compensation. These findings are consistent with ongoing bargaining trends and align with the feedback we receive from our members on a regular basis.

We believe that a comprehensive understanding of the workforce is essential for addressing the recruitment and retention crisis. By combining the data from both surveys, AMO can create a more accurate and nuanced picture of the challenges facing the municipal sector. This will enable us to develop effective strategies to attract and retain workforce, ensuring the continued delivery of high-quality services to our communities.

Below, we delve deeper into the similarities and differences found in the surveys.

## SUMMARY

- **Compensation:** Both CUPE Ontario and AMO surveys identified base salary/wage as a top priority for improvement, indicating a need for more competitive compensation packages.
- **Recognition:** Feeling undervalued and lacking recognition were common concerns among both CUPE Ontario and AMO survey respondents. Implementing strategies to acknowledge and appreciate employees' contributions can significantly boost morale and loyalty.
- **Dissatisfaction Among Front-Line Workers:** CUPE Ontario's survey revealed a higher level of dissatisfaction among front-line workers compared to AMO's survey, suggesting a need to address specific challenges faced by frontline workers.
- **Retention Challenges:** While both surveys found a significant portion of employees intending to stay with their current municipalities, AMO's survey identified retirement as a primary reason for leaving, whereas CUPE Ontario's survey highlighted low wages and lack of career advancement opportunities as key factors.
- **Leadership:** Effective leadership was consistently highlighted as a crucial factor in employee satisfaction and retention.
- **Value of Professional Growth:** Younger employees in CUPE Ontario placed a higher value on opportunities for professional growth, emphasizing the importance of providing development pathways to attract and retain talent.
- **Equity-Deserving Groups:** A significant proportion of employees who expressed a desire to leave due to limited advancement opportunities identified as belonging to equity-deserving groups, highlighting the need to address systemic barriers and promote equity within the municipal workforce.
- **Recruitment and Diversity:** CUPE Ontario's survey revealed that a larger percentage of respondents entered municipal employment at the entry level compared to AMO's survey, emphasizing the potential for a more diverse workforce.

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of addressing a range of factors to improve employee satisfaction, retention, and the overall health of the municipal workforce. By focusing on compensation, recognition, career advancement opportunities, and equity initiatives, municipalities can create a more positive and supportive work environment that attracts and retains top talent.

# MAJOR TAKEAWAYS

## Wage and Compensation Concerns

Both surveys acknowledged the significant concern of municipal workers regarding wages that have not kept pace with the rising cost of living. As AMO has noted, “salary and wages are overwhelmingly the top aspect employees want improved in their current workplaces, with 42% of respondents selecting it as a top three area of improvement.”<sup>1</sup>

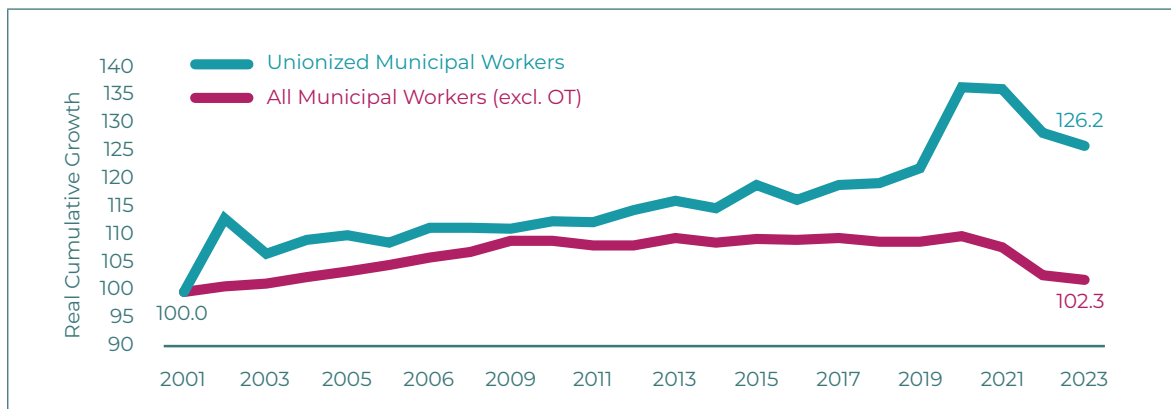
Similarly, the results of the CUPE Ontario survey highlighted that salary/wages were a top three concern. Over half of respondents in the CUPE Ontario survey reported frequent worries about meeting their financial obligations, while nearly 80% of frontline workers expressed income-related concerns. These worries are exacerbated by the fact that over 55% of respondents have dependents living with them. To supplement their income, over one-third of municipal employees reported working a second job. This is contributing to low morale, burnout, and exhaustion from overwork.

A stark contrast emerges when examining wage growth for unionized municipal workers over the past generation. After adjusting for inflation, wages for these workers have seen virtually no growth, barely keeping up with the overall cost of living. This stagnation is particularly concerning given the increasing demands of the job and the rising costs of basic necessities.

In contrast, AMO’s review of wage growth for all municipal workers, including both unionized and non-unionized staff, revealed a more substantial increase. However, this average was skewed upward by the more significant wage growth among non-unionized workers. The disparity between unionized and non-unionized wage growth highlights the urgent need for a more equitable compensation structure.

## Unionized municipal workers have barely seen real wage growth over a generation

Real cumulative wage growth of unionized municipal workers and all municipal workers



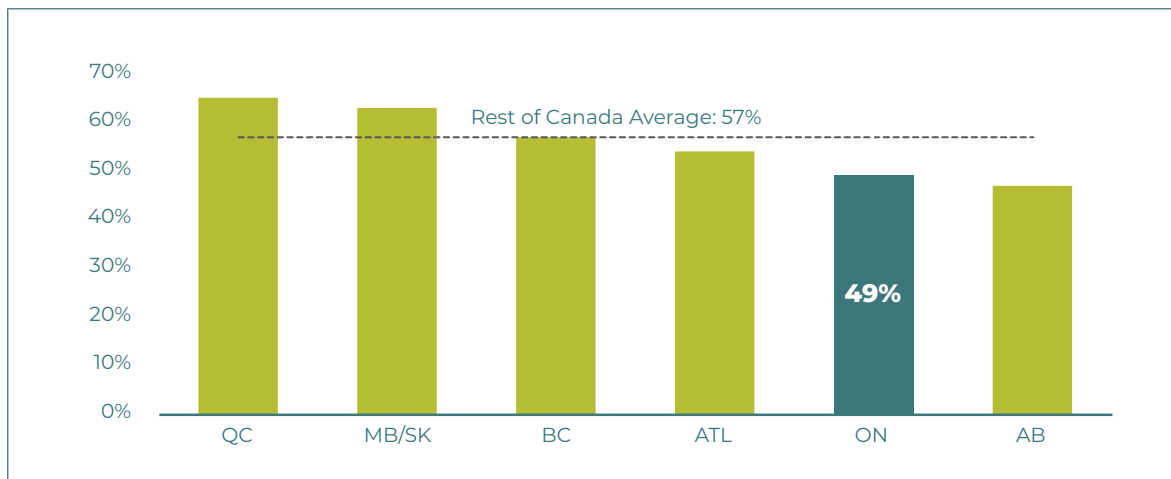
Source: Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0204-01 and Ministry of Labour

The path forward from these results is uncertain. AMO's response to the wage concerns primarily focused on improving public perception and attracting more individuals to the municipal sector. This response is seemingly based on the belief that there is a lack of knowledge about local government and insufficient marketing efforts are contributing to the recruitment and retention challenges.

While these factors may play a role, recent Leger polling data revealed that only 49% of Ontarians trust their municipal government, which is the second worst rate in Canada.<sup>2</sup> Given the high level of interaction between citizens and their local governments, a "lack of knowledge about local government" is not likely reflective of Ontarians understating of municipalities. The effectiveness of a PR campaign to "sell the sector" without other material changes such as an increase in wages is uncertain to work.

## Less than one in two people trust Ontario municipalities

Trust in Muncipl Administrations



Source: Léger - Trust in Institutions: Survey of Canadians 2023

CUPE Ontario's survey results draw a direct line between the importance of substantial wage increases as a key factor in recruitment and retention. This is particularly relevant considering the recent spike in inflation, which has disproportionately affected housing and food costs. By failing to keep wages competitive, municipalities risk losing valuable employees to other sectors.

While AMO's approach of improving public perception may be a worthwhile long-term goal, it does not address the immediate and pressing issue of inadequate wages. Municipalities must prioritize substantial wage increases, particularly for those who have seen the least growth, to retain existing employees, attract new talent, and ensure the delivery of essential services to their communities. By doing so, they can begin to rebuild trust from a decade of austerity and create a more sustainable and equitable workplace for their employees.

## ***Equity Within the Workforce***

While both surveys highlight diversity issues within the municipal workforce, there is a significant disparity in representation between front-line unionized workers and management within Ontario's municipal sector. While AMO's survey revealed that 23% of respondents identified as members of an equity-deserving group, our survey found that 33% of respondents did so. At the very extreme end, AMO has helpfully pointed out in its Environmental Scan that "according to a 2021 survey of Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO) members, the majority of whom work in the clerk's, CAO's or treasurer's office, 92% self-identify as white/Caucasian/European."<sup>3</sup> This discrepancy underscores a systemic issue that must be addressed with urgency.

The demographics of our front-line workforce more accurately reflect the diversity of the communities we serve. This is not coincidental; it is a direct consequence of the historical and ongoing marginalization of racialized groups in our society. For centuries, people of colour have been subjected to discriminatory practices that have limited their access to education, employment, and economic opportunities. These systemic injustices have had a profound impact on the composition of our municipal workforces.

While municipalities have made some progress in diversifying their workforces, much more needs to be done. The rise of populism and the increasing prevalence of hostile work environments are driving equity-deserving groups away from the public sector. This is particularly concerning as Ontario's population becomes increasingly racialized through immigration. If we fail to create inclusive and welcoming workplaces that reflect the communities we serve, we will simply perpetuate the injustices of the past.

## ***Job Satisfaction: A Front-Line Perspective***

CUPE Ontario's survey on job satisfaction among front-line municipal workers revealed stark differences compared to AMO's broader survey, highlighting a significant gap in perceptions between management and frontline staff. While 25% of AMO's respondents reported being highly satisfied with their jobs, only 8% of CUPE Ontario's front-line workers expressed the same sentiment. Moreover, 35% of CUPE Ontario members indicated mixed feelings, and nearly one-third (31%) were dissatisfied or highly dissatisfied. These figures stand in stark contrast to AMO's findings, where only 12% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction.

This disparity aligns with the low morale and negative experiences frequently shared by front-line workers. They often face compounding challenges, including conflicts with the public, elected officials, colleagues, and higher-level staff.

The survey also identified key areas for improvement, including effective leadership, recognition for work, base salary and wages, pension/benefits, and advancement opportunities. These factors were consistently ranked among the top areas needing improvement and the least appreciated aspects of the job.

AMO's Workforce Development Project focused on recruitment and retention, but municipalities must strive to retain talent beyond the early years. The survey findings suggest that improvements are needed to maintain employee satisfaction. CUPE Ontario's members identified wages, lack of advancement opportunities, and a sense of unfulfillment as major concerns.

Work environment also played a role in job satisfaction. Employees who worked primarily away from an office reported lower satisfaction levels than those primarily working in an office or a mix of both. Autonomy over one's workday emerged as an area for improvement, such as flexible work arrangements and compressed work weeks.

While the surveys yielded similar results regarding the likelihood of employees staying in their current municipalities (60% for CUPE Ontario, 66% for AMO), the reasons for leaving differed significantly. AMO's respondents cited retirement as the primary factor, while CUPE Ontario's members overwhelmingly pointed to low wages. The impending retirement of many front-line workers highlights the need for effective succession planning and knowledge transfer.

The survey also revealed that 70% of those considering leaving due to limited advancement opportunities were concerned about financial obligations, suggesting a desire for higher-paying jobs. Additionally, 66% of employees who cited low wages as a key reason for leaving were middle-aged (30-54 years old), indicating that this issue disproportionately affects specific age groups.

Unsurprisingly, 45% of participants who identified a lack of advancement opportunities as a reason for leaving also belonged to equity-deserving groups, highlighting the need for stronger internal equity policies and initiatives.

## CONCLUSION

Based on CUPE Ontario's survey, it is not surprising that municipalities are facing challenges with recruitment and retention. To address these issues, municipalities must prioritize:

- **Improved wages and compensation:** Competitive pay is essential to attract and retain talent.
- **Enhanced job satisfaction:** Creating a positive work environment that values employee contributions is crucial.
- **Equity initiatives:** Ensuring that all employees feel valued, respected, and have equal opportunities is fundamental.

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