

Contract talks break down for 70,000 Ontario hospital workers

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The unions representing 70,000 frontline hospital staff in Ontario and their employer—for all intents and purposes, the Doug Ford-led provincial Tory government—are preparing to impose sellout contracts once they let the membership blow off some steam before Thursday's provincial elections.

Since last July, the hospital workers—members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees' Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU-CUPE) and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)—have been engaged in a bitter struggle for adequate staffing levels, wage increases that match current rates of inflation, improved mental health supports and workplace protection from COVID-19 and other highly infectious diseases. This includes adequate access to personal protective equipment. The collective agreements between CUPE and the SEIU and the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA) expired, respectively, last September and December.

Due to Ontario's anti-worker labour relations system, which CUPE, the SEIU and the entire union bureaucracy support and police, health care workers have no right to strike. If a resolution to the issues in dispute is not reached by June, the terms of employment for tens of thousands of health care employees will be determined by a government-appointed arbitrator.

OCHU-CUPE announced in mid-May that bargaining had broken down with the OHA, which represents 154 public hospitals across the province. According to CUPE, the OHA is refusing to address workers' demands for wage increases commensurate with the soaring cost of living and better health-and-safety protections and is demanding concessions in other areas.

Hospital workers' real wages have been steadily eroded since the hard-right Conservative government implemented Bill 124. Adopted in November 2019, Bill 124 capped wage increases for more than 1 million provincial public sector workers at 1 percent annually for three years. With the official inflation rate at a 31-year high of close to 7 percent—and prices of food, energy and other essentials rising even more rapidly—a 1 percent wage “increase” would mean a real-terms pay cut in the order of 6 percent just in the first year of the hospital workers' contracts.

The overwhelming majority of hospital workers have adamantly rejected the OHA's rotten contract offer, which is based on Bill

124's anti-worker wage cap. A survey conducted earlier in the month by the SEIU, which represents 17,000 hospital workers, showed that 96 percent of them support rejecting OHA's offer. Moreover, fully half (50 percent) said that if Bill 124 is not repealed, they would quit and seek employment outside of Ontario's hospital system in pursuit of higher wages.

The onerous, indeed punitive, working conditions that confront hospital staff due to chronic short-staffing as a result of decades of austerity, have dramatically worsened during the pandemic. As result of the ruinous back-to-work/back-to-school policies pursued by all levels of government, Canada has experienced six successive waves of mass infection and death. Ontario's hospital system has repeatedly been overwhelmed by the massive influx of COVID-19 patients, forcing surgeries and other vitally needed medical procedures to be postponed and driving workers to their physical and mental limits. Canada's official COVID-19 death toll now stands at over 40,000, with Ontario accounting for more than 13,200 of them.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been over 30,000 COVID-19 infections and more than 17 deaths among Ontario health care workers. From January 14, 2022, to February 16, 2022, health worker COVID-19 infections rose from 28,336 to 34,662, a huge spike associated with the rationing of personal protective equipment and the forcing of infected workers to work during what had hitherto been recognized as the necessary isolation period.

The unrelenting all-sided health care crisis, the product of decades of cuts by governments of all stripes, has fueled a mass exodus of health care workers from the profession. Ontario currently has the lowest ratio of registered nurses in the country working in direct care, and a pandemic backlog of almost 22 million health care services, including 1 million surgeries.

Job vacancies are mounting at hospitals across the province, with CUPE reporting 32,000 open positions in nursing and residential care facilities and another 10,350 in ambulatory care. The provincial hospital job vacancy rate has almost quadrupled since 2015. Over the past two years, registered nurse vacancies have more than doubled and registered practical nurse vacancies more than tripled. Ford's solution, after a sweeping campaign of austerity and privatization, was to tout a measly \$5,000 retention bonus for nurses.

Rallies organized by CUPE calling for the repeal of Bill 124, which would put an end to the government-mandated public sector

wage caps, are being held around the province. The union's fraudulent posturing on this issue allows the membership to let off steam without posing any real threat to the government-OHA drive to impose real-terms wage cuts. The union is fully aware that come June, a rigged, pro-employer arbitration board will be tasked with determining all outstanding contract issues. Hospital workers will have no right to even vote on the new "collective agreements" that will bind them for the next two years.

With the aid of the unions, governments and corporations across Canada are increasingly resorting to binding arbitration to impose concessionary contracts in the face of growing worker anger and militancy, especially in sectors and industries deemed "essential." Recent examples include railway workers strikes at Canadian Pacific Railway and Toronto Union Station which were abruptly shut down by the unions with all outstanding issues sent to binding arbitration, thereby robbing workers of any right to vote on their future terms of employment and any legal right to carry out collective job action for years hence.

Although Bill 124 was adopted more than two years ago and upwards of a million workers—including teachers, municipal workers and provincial government employees—have already been subjected to the 1 percent wage cap, the unions have mounted no struggle against it. While claiming to oppose the wage cap, time and again the union bureaucrats have signed contracts enforcing it. Never was there any question of joint strike action against Bill 124. Instead, the unions organized a handful of pro forma anti-Bill 124 protest rallies and demonstrations.

Recently, the Ontario Federation of Labour, CUPE and other unions have become somewhat more vocal in their denunciations of Bill 124 in an attempt to subdue growing rank-and-file anger as prices surge. Their anti-Bill 124 campaign is also part of their attempts to drum up support for the so-called "progressive parties," the NDP and Liberals, in the June 2 provincial election.

Insofar as the unions are opposed to Bill 124 and more generally the Ford government, it is not because it imposes real-terms pay cuts on public sector workers and slashes public services. Over the past four decades, the unions have renounced any association with working class struggle and integrated themselves evermore completely into management and the state. Rather, what they resent is that the Conservative government is less inclined, than the other two traditional parties, to make use of their services as corporatist "partners" in imposing the agenda of the ruling class, depriving them of some of their perks and influence.

Both the New Democrats and Liberals have pledged to rescind Bill 124 if they come to power after Thursday's vote. These pledges are entirely bogus. First, neither party is proposing to rescind the already negotiated contracts that have imposed Ford's three-year 1 percent wage cap, whether fully or, depending on the agreement's length, partially. Second, neither is promising to restore public sector workers' real wages or purchasing power in their future contracts.

Rather, the NDP and Liberals' pledge to rescind Bill 124 is based on the calculation that the ruling class agenda of public sector austerity and wage restraint can be more effectively achieved through cooperation with the trade unions rather than by government fiat. They also recognize that wage restraint in the

health care system has been so severe in recent years that it has severely exacerbated chronic staff shortages, threatening it with collapse; and that wage compensation, including through bonuses and anti-worker productivity deals, needs to be increased beyond the 1 percent cap to retain and attract sufficient staff.

When the Liberals last held power in Ontario, they imposed a four-year spending freeze on hospital funding between 2012 and 2016, with the support of the NDP, which had a devastating impact on Ontario's hospitals. Between 2013 and 2016, the Wynne government cut thousands of hospital jobs, including nursing positions.

Elsewhere, the unions play an equally sinister role. Last June, the Quebec nurses' union, the *Fédération interprofessionnelle de la santé du Québec* (FIQ), pushed through a sellout agreement it reached with Quebec's hard-right Legault government, despite widespread worker anger over the contract terms, which included paltry salary "increases." The three-year contract excludes any serious measures to combat chronic staff shortages, perpetuates a punishing mandatory overtime regime and maintains the "emergency" COVID-19 ministerial decrees that give the government extraordinary powers to dictate working conditions in the health care sector.

A genuine fight for better wages and working conditions in hospitals can only be mounted through the formation of rank-and-file committees controlled by hospital workers themselves, and independent of the establishment political parties and their union lackeys, all of which serve the interests of big business. This struggle must link up with other health care workers across Canada and the United States, where tens of thousands of nurses have struck in recent months for improvements to wages and conditions, so as to mobilize the full collective strength of the working class against social spending cuts and anti-strike legislation, and in defense of jobs, wages and public services.



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