

Police mobilized to break picket lines in 6-week Ontario community services workers' strike

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Tensions continue to rise at picket lines across the province as about 4,500 Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU/SEFPO) community and social services workers in 27 union locals enter their sixth week on strike or lockout.

On Tuesday, June 23, police were called to break up pickets at a London Sheraton hotel. Management had been billeting scab labour at the hotel and using vans to shepherd the replacement workers across the lines to strikebound Community Living facilities in the city.

After the incident, OPSEU President JP Hornick told reporters, "What we're seeing across the province is that some of these so-called replacement workers, I call them scabs, are not actually licensed appropriately. They don't have relationships with the clients. We've seen agencies up here like they've been moving people into buildings that are meant for offices but now are being used to house clients. It's actually disgusting and immoral."

Other union locals in the province have also mobilized to protest the deployment of scab labour by demonstrating outside third-party contractors, who are recruiting the strike-breaking workforce. In Toronto, police have intimidated strikers at every shift change at a downtown Sistering facility. Earlier this month, strikers reported being pushed and shoved by police to move pickets protesting the deployment of strike-breakers at a Sistering drop-in center for vulnerable women and gender-diverse clients.

The community service workers are the lowest paid public sector workers in the province. Due to miserable contracts which did not keep pace with inflation, they actually earn less today than they did in 2018. The workers perform critical community support functions in autism programs, palliative care facilities, psychiatric treatment centers, disabled development centers, substance abuse programs, women-in-crisis units, homeless shelters, youth programs and many other fields servicing the most vulnerable people in the province. Prior to the strike, the workers campaigned for over a year demanding that the government of right-wing Premier Doug Ford address the crisis of systemic underfunding for the community services sector but were entirely ignored.

Management claimed it would reduce some services to cover the most essential duties with its contingency plans. However, it is becoming more and more apparent that these "contingency plans" make a mockery of their care commitments. Vulnerable clients have been doubled up in already overcrowded group homes and even dispatched to low-rent hotels. In several facilities in Thunder Bay, developmentally challenged clients were bundled together and sent to management's administrative office space. Throughout the system,

replacement workers are unlicensed and woefully under-qualified. In many instances, family members have withdrawn their vulnerable relatives entirely from the system to personally care for them back at their family residence.

There are two main issues in the strike. Workers are demanding the government reverse its massive funding cuts to community and social services programs. The government's 2025-26 budget projected a \$1.5 billion budget shortfall for the Ministry of Community and Social Services even as some 70,000 children with autism and 52,000 people with developmental disabilities remain on waiting lists for services. Social services researchers have argued that the Ford government has been funneling billions of taxpayer dollars into private, for-profit intermediaries, while underfunding public frontline services.

Secondly, the strikers are demanding wage increases, including compensation for the government's wage-suppression legislation that was ruled unconstitutional by the courts in 2022 and again on appeal in 2024. The Ford government's Bill 124 capped annual compensation increases for most public sector workers at 1 percent during the three years of spiking inflation following the 2019 legislation. Since the repeal of the legislation, public sector workers have bargained for retroactive wage increases of 6.5 percent or more. However, the government continues to resist settlements, or even discussion, in the broader public service that includes the community service workers.

The community services sector is not the only area being starved of funding. The government has a projected deficit of \$13.8 billion and is using this to justify further austerity for public services and public sector workers. Critical social services like healthcare, education and housing are already chronically underfunded due to cost-cutting budgets enforced by Ford since taking power in 2018. Prior to that, governments led by the Liberals, Conservatives and NDP imposed strict fiscal discipline for public spending since the 1990s, while slashing taxes for big business and the rich, producing an explosion in poverty and the growth of a super-rich elite.

Earlier this month, 4,100 members of the Ontario Nurses' Association were forced into binding arbitration with for-profit long-term care employers. The nurses' main priority is securing wage parity between for-profit nursing homes and public sector care facilities. For-profit nursing home nurses are paid significantly less than their hospital sector counterparts, sometimes by \$10 to \$15 per hour.

The dispute in the long-term care facilities once again raises the question of workers' rights in the province. Under the long-standing

Hospital Labour Disputes Arbitration Act, Ontario nurses are all deemed essential workers and are legally prohibited from striking. Nurses are prohibited from taking any job action whatsoever, whether it be overtime bans, work-to-rule or withdrawal of labour by a portion of a workforce after essential coverage is negotiated.

On May 5, the Ontario Nurses Association, which organizes more than 60,000 nurses in the province, launched a court challenge arguing that the Act is unconstitutional and in violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Earlier this month, members of the BC Nurses Union, which has the right to strike as long as essential coverage is guaranteed, voted by 67 percent to reject a tentative contract that had been unanimously recommended by union officials. Some 60,000 nurses have been fighting for a new contract since March 2025. Prior to the announcement that a tentative deal had been reached, the nurses voted by 98.2 percent for strike action. However, union officials refused to give notice to strike and instead decided to present a miserable contract to the membership.

In Nova Scotia, an eight-week strike to end poverty wages by 3,600 long-term care facility workers organized in the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) recently was suspended as workers in dozens of locals vote on a tentative deal. Several locals have re-started their strikes after a final settlement was not ratified.

The strike is the latest indication of mounting working class opposition across Canada to the ruling class's imposition of savage austerity and the gutting of workers' rights to pay for war and further swell the financial oligarchy's vast wealth. Contradicting the bogus claims of the mainstream media, establishment parties and the trade union bureaucracy of a "Team Canada" united across all social classes in the ongoing trade war with the United States, the various healthcare and community services workers' strikes underscore yet again that Canada, like every country, is riven by irreconcilable class conflict under conditions of a deepening global capitalist crisis.

Ford's onslaught on public services and programs for the most vulnerable is part of a class-war agenda spearheaded by Carney's Liberal government. The federal government is committed to spending an outrageous 5 percent of the GDP on the military and related infrastructure, which equates to over \$150 billion every year. It continues to push for the escalation of the imperialist war against Russia in Ukraine and has developed a "defence industrial strategy" to pour tens of billions of dollars into developing Canadian industry's capacities for war production. At the same time, the Carney government, working with its provincial government partners, is boosting the wealth of Canada's financial oligarchy with tax breaks and other handouts.

In the face of all of this, the OPSEU officialdom in the community services strike centers its strategy upon an appeal to the vicious anti-worker Ford government to reverse its position. OPSEU, with the support of the Ontario Federation of Labour (OFL), is doing everything to confine the community services strike within the pro-employer collective bargaining system, isolating the strike even as the employers, with the government's support and encouragement, employs scabs.

This is the same government that has savaged the province's community college network, axing 10,000 OPSEU education workers' jobs and closing dozens of college programs. It has massively slashed grant and loan funding to Ontario's post-secondary students, continues its creeping privatization of the LCBO and is cutting another 2,500 hospital beds even as studies show hospitals need another 4,000 beds.

The politics of Hornick and other "left" union bureaucrats have an especially debilitating impact on the emerging working class opposition to austerity and war. Hornick and Co. bluster loudly about their support for "militant" worker action and even deliver the occasional swipe at government policy. But they work tirelessly to confine workers to isolated job actions. Whenever conditions arise where a mass movement could develop into a politically independent direction, challenging the ruling class's "right" to plunder workers and public services, the "left" bureaucrats are no less ruthless than their more conventional colleagues in sabotaging the fight.

This was underscored by the education support workers' strike of 2022, which produced calls from workers across the province for a general strike after 55,000 strikers walked off the job in defiance of the Ford government's preemptive ban of the strike. Hornick, together with the leaderships of the OFL, Canadian Labour Congress and Unifor, swooped in to throw Ford a lifeline and strangled the strike without any of the workers' demands being met.

OPSEU workers, who saw their own strikes isolated at the community colleges and at the LCBO, ultimately were forced to settle for contracts that failed to address their central demands.

The developments in the community services workers' strike underline that the striking workers are not simply in a contract struggle but a political fight that pits them against the class war agenda spearheaded by the Ontario Tory government and Carney's Liberals, backed up by all of corporate Canada. In this, despite their hollow claims of "solidarity," the OFL, alongside the OPSEU officialdom, rejects any call to mobilize the immense power of the working class across the province and country to make the struggle by the community services workers part of a political offensive to defeat the Ford government.

The immediate task facing the strikers is to appeal for support from broader sections of workers, all of whom confront the same threats of precarious employment, layoffs, wage cuts and worsening public services, to join a worker-led industrial and political counteroffensive to secure decent-paying, secure jobs and well-funded public services for all. If community service workers and the working class as a whole are to make real advances, they must move independently of the unions by forming rank-and-file committees in every workplace to arm workers with a socialist and internationalist program to oppose the never-ending attacks on workers' rights that flow inevitably from the capitalist profit system which breeds austerity and war.



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