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CUPE's education workers escalate job action

TORONTO, ON – Education workers represented across Ontario by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) are escalating their job actions today after the latest round of negotiations failed to produce an agreement.

“We didn’t see movement on the issues CUPE members sent us to the table to discuss,” said Terri Preston, Chair of the Ontario School Board Coordinating Committee (OSBCC), after meetings with the Crown and the Council of Trustee Associations (CTA) ended without sufficient progress yesterday.

Many of the issues that CUPE brought to the table are less about money and more about the will to acknowledge the importance of members’ work, explained Preston, adding that staffing levels are one of the key issues. Custodial staff, educational assistants and others are seeing their numbers reduced while some of their work shifts are cut in half.

“In some instances, we seem to be dealing with a deliberate effort to ignore the realities of our jobs. For example, the current funding formula for schools doesn’t pay for school hallways to be swept. Can you imagine expecting a school to be cleaned but not include having the hallway swept?”

Preston continued: “That is why we are working hard to ensure adequate custodial staffing levels: so that we can provide effective preventive maintenance programs and keep the learning environment clean and safe.”

She also expressed concern that, without progress in negotiations, students with special needs will not get the extra help they need.

“We take our work and the roles we play in the school community seriously. Yet our participation in staff meetings, parents’ nights and special school events is too often without pay,” added Preston. “We are only asking that education workers be allowed to take an official role in the meetings and events that are so important to students’ success.”

Phase One of the work-to-rule job action, which began the first week of school, was undertaken by the 55,000 education workers represented by the Canadian Union of Public Employees. It put limits on the unpaid time employees worked, instructing them not to work through unpaid lunches and breaks and to avoid performing duties before or after their work shift.

For the second phase, new instructions were added to those itemized in Phase One, such as not handling hazardous materials if the appropriate equipment is unavailable or completing reports that are not mandatory. As in Phase One, at no time will CUPE members’ actions compromise student safety.

The next phases will include rotating strikes and a province-wide strike should the next round of negotiations not lead to an agreement, said Preston.

Education workers, who have been without a contract for more than a year, include educational assistants, office administrators, custodians, tradespeople, instructors, library technicians, early childhood educators, IT specialists, speech pathologists and many others.

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