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Contract negotiations for 70,000 Ontario hospital workers break down over hospitals' refusal to seriously address health and safety issues, including pandemic protection and violence

TORONTO, ON - "We are deeply disappointed that Ontario's hospitals will not seriously address the pressing health and safety needs of registered practical nurses, personal support workers, clerical, cleaners and other front-line hospital staff," say the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and SEIU Healthcare in announcing the break down of contract negotiations for 70,000 Ontario hospital staff.

While dealing with exhaustion and the mental and physical scars of four waves of pandemic work, Ontario hospital workers faced an aggressive attack on their working conditions and wages by their hospital employers, who pushed rollbacks in this round of provincial contract negotiations, which began in June and continued through September.

During negotiations and mediation, hospital staff spoke bravely from the heart about their personal challenges, the risks of working through the pandemic and extreme exhaustion, the realities of catching the virus, and a rising tide of patient and family member violence. Despite these horrific stories, key health and safety provisions – including guaranteed access to pandemic safety equipment and improved violence and mental health supports – were rebuffed by the Ontario Hospital Association (OHA), that negotiates on behalf of Ontario's hospitals.

"After over a year and a half working through the greatest health crisis of our generation, Ontario's hospitals had an opportunity to show they respect and value the front-line workers who have kept this province going. Instead, they came to the bargaining table refusing to implement simple measures that would keep workers, patients and families safe. We refuse to accept any contract that doesn't give these courageous workers the protection they desperately need," says SEIU Healthcare President Sharleen Stewart.

Racially-directed abuse, sexual assault and harassment, and physical violence and aggression against hospital workers is a staggering problem for this female-dominated and racialized workforce. In a recent poll of 2658 front-line hospital workers, 66% said violent incidence have increased during the pandemic, 84% report they have been verbally harassed and 56% say they have been physically abused by patients or their family member. Racialized and First Nations-Indigenous hospital workers reported significantly higher incidents of both verbal harassment and physical violence because of their race, appearance, or sexual orientation at 54% and 64% respectively.

"The hospitals have refused throughout the pandemic to treat COVID-19 as an airborne virus and to protect against that threat, which has had a terrible impact on patient and worker safety. Protecting staff from contracting or spreading the virus by providing them with effective equipment is fundamental to protecting them, their families, and the patients they care for. At least 860 Ontario patients have died from the virus contracted in hospital," says Michael Hurley president of CUPE's Ontario Council of Hospital Unions (OCHU/CUPE).

CUPE and SEIU Healthcare say the hospitals ignorance in ensuring that workers have the protections they need to work safely during the pandemic and to deal with violence in their workplaces “is incomprehensible” and they we will be doubling efforts to talk directly to Ontarians about these major problems.

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