

LCBO employees heading back to work



By Bill Kilpatrick

After a two-week strike that began on July 5 and saw 10,000 LCBO employees walk off the job, OPSEU, the union representing the workers, and the LCBO struck a deal on July 20 that would see the strike end at 12:01am on Monday July 22 and stores reopening on July 23. According to the Financial Post the initial deal, that was negotiated on July 19, almost fell through when the LCBO accused the union of bargaining in bad faith and the union said that the LCBO refused to sign a back to work protocol and also accused the LCBO of bargaining in bad faith. However, both sides were able to get beyond the impasse and by Saturday July 20 the deal was back on.

The contract will see the workers get an eight percent raise over three years along with an additional 7.8 per cent for the lowest paid workers according to a CBC article. The article further pointed out that there will be a "special wage adjustment" for certain positions within the LCBO warehouses along with "60 permanent full-time employees in its warehouse operations and improved access to benefits for casual part-time employees who work 1,300 hours and 1,000 hours." The deal, according to the LCBO, also includes improvements in severance and mental health benefits. According to an OPSEU press release the union was very happy with the concessions. Colleen MacLeod, the bargaining team chair said, "We went on strike to protect good jobs and public revenues, and to win more permanent jobs with benefits and guaranteed hours. Our members stood strong. They held strong lines, they talked to their communities -- and they won."

Two of the biggest concessions that the union managed to gain was that there would be "no retail store closures related to marketplace expansion for the life of the collective agreement," and a conversion of 1,000 casual positions to permanent part-time positions, the CBC article reported. According to the OPSEU press release the return of permanent part-time positions was something that MacLeod did not think she would ever see in her lifetime, "In my 27 years at the LCBO, the employer has continuously casualized the workforce, so that people wouldn't get guaranteed hours, benefits or any hope of permanent work. Permanent part-time nearly went extinct," said MacLeod. "I am beyond proud that we fought back and won these permanent jobs ? it will improve the lives of workers and their families for many years to come." Currently, according to OPSEU, 70 percent of the LCBO workforce is casual.

Bancroft This Week reached out to some LCBO employees to hear from them about the realities of working for the LCBO. They

explained that while many people think that working for the LCBO is a great job as it is a government job that is unionized, in many cases that is not the reality at all. Many of them live in constant fear of losing hours and have safety concerns from being understaffed. Many employees live in fear of being bumped out of positions, making enough money to earn benefits, and paying for basic necessities. All of the employees were in agreement that working conditions have consistently deteriorated over the last 20 years and that now it is nearly impossible for a new employee, especially in a rural setting, to make a living or get a full-time position.

One employee, who did not want to be named, has only worked for the LCBO for just over two years. They were hired to fill in on lunch breaks, which means they get three hours per week, but will sometimes get more hours if people are sick or on vacation. This employee will never earn enough to qualify for benefits. For this employee, who is semi-retired, this is perfect, but admits that there is no way anyone could make a living just working three hours per week. In fact, this employee was making more money while on strike than while they were working during the busiest season. This person stated very clearly that they loved their job, but just wished that they were guaranteed more hours, which was something that the union was fighting for during the strike.

Terry Falan worked for the LCBO for 24 years and retired in 2022 and has experienced all the good and bad of the LCBO. He worked as a casual employee, a full-time employee, and as a manager of the Gooderham LCBO and the Wilberforce LCBO for three years and found a drastic deterioration of working conditions during his time. When he was hired at a Toronto area LCBO back in 1998, as a bottom rung casual he was getting 40 hours per week with the option of working overtime on Sundays. He stayed working as a casual for 16 years even though could have had a full-time position in Toronto at 10 years. Falan was holding out for a full-time position in cottage country, but what really pushed him into taking a full-time position was that his shifts were constantly being cut back. "As the years went by my hours started to get cut," he explained, "It went from an eight-hour shift to a 7.5 hour shift, and then it went to seven, and then it went to 6.5, and just before I took full time my shifts dropped to a five hour shift. By this time, I was the top casual on the rung. Good loyalty there eh? That was one of the reasons that I went full-time. There was no way I was going to keep working there [as a casual] and being slapped in the face like that. "they just kept cutting me and cutting me."

He further explained that this was how the LCBO continued to make profits, because his hours would get distributed to those below him who made less per hour. "They kept giving the bottom people the hours. [According to the contract] you can't give a bottom casual more hours than a top casual, but they were paying them less money. So, that's how they saved money, on my back." Falan further pointed out that he does not believe that the public is aware of the precarious position that 70 per cent of LCBO employees are in stating "Over two-thirds of the workforce is made up of casual people and they start at just over \$16 per hour with no guarantee of hours, no benefits until they are at least five years in and they must meet the minimum required hours of between 1,100 and 1,300 hours per year which a majority of them can't attain because they can't get scheduled. People don't know these things?"

Falan clearly enjoyed his work at the LCBO and said that there was "nothing wrong with the job" and pointed out that "it's a good job," but added that the problem was the corporate structure. As a former manager he spoke about the pressure from above to "stay on budget" or come in under budget especially in the fall when the LCBO pushed what he called the "eight and three" hour shifts. He explained that the managers, especially those at the smaller rural stores, were told that they could only book the manager for eight hours and a casual for three hours per day. The result was that the manager was working alone for some five hours which Falan said posed a safety risk. He pointed out the risks that only having one employee working, who might have health issues, could pose in the event of a health emergency, and further added that there was an increased risk of robberies with only one employee working, along with the risks that comes from refusing an intoxicated person who could potentially become violent. "The union has been fighting for years to have increased safety by ensuring that nobody works alone and for there to be at least two people in the stores at all times, but in the smaller stores like Buckhorn, Gooderham, Whitney, and Coe Hill, they just won't go for it. It's all about the budget? eight and three, eight and three," said Falan.

All of the LCBO employees that spoke to Bancroft This Week agreed that there should be a minimum number of hours that casual workers should get or, as suggested by Falan, perhaps the LCBO should go to a seasonal style of work where employees get enough hours during the busy season to apply for Employment Insurance in the off season. Instead, says Falan, the LCBO eliminated almost all the permanent part-time positions for the "don't use/ don't pay" casual model stating, "There's not job security in that." When asked what he would like to see in the new contract he said, "When people get hired as a casual they should have some type of

guarantee that they're going to get a minimum number of hours, so they know they can survive. Is that too much to ask for??

While there are provisions in the new contract for some 1,000 permanent part-time positions that will guarantee hours for those employees, it's not clear how that will impact the hours of the remaining 6,000 casual employees who still have no such guarantee.