

ONA nurses strike, demand fair wages and respect



By Nate Smelle

On Friday, Aug. 18, 50 registered nurses, public health nurses and registered practical nurses with the Hastings and Prince Edward Public Health Unit voted overwhelmingly in favour of rejecting their employer's final contract offer. Having been working without a contract since Dec. 31, 2022, the 50 nurses represented by the Ontario Nurses' Association who provide care and services to more than 200,000 residents throughout the two counties launched a strike on Monday, Aug. 21. Joshua Davidson Marcon is ONA's bargaining unit president for Hastings and Prince Edward Public Health. Seated at the bargaining table on behalf of ONA, he said, are: three ONA nurses from the HPEPH negotiating team, and one labour relations officer. For the employer, Davidson Marcon said there were two directors, one human resources manager, and their negotiation representative. Pointing out how the nurses' association has gone to extraordinary lengths to reach a fair deal with their employer, he said their employer has not budged in regard to the main issue on the table - fair wages. Providing insight into the labour dispute, Davidson Marcon explained: "We tried to go to the table; we went to conciliation and their offer didn't change; we offered to go into mediation; we offered voluntary arbitration; we even decreased our ask to show good faith when they were unwilling to increase their offer. So we have done everything we can? Our members have indicated that with the rising cost of living and inflation they can't keep up with it if their salaries don't increase. We are not even asking to get inflation back. Every year that you lose more than what inflation is, you are losing value from the year before. What happens when our kids are going into the workforce? If our salaries have been decimated then the middle class is just going to continue to shrink.?" What they're trying to do, is they're trying to demoralize us," he continued.

They're trying to push us to the brink; and they're also trying to potentially bankrupt us, so that we have to go back to the office to accept their measly offer. Since 2011, Davidson Marcon said there has been a steady decline in wages for ONA's public health nurses in Hastings and Prince Edward counties. During this time, he said their members have lost over 12 per cent in purchasing power due to inflation and the rising cost of living. Acknowledging how essential the care and services provided by public health nurses proved to be during the pandemic, Davidson Marcon said when COVID-19 first arrived on the scene nurses and health-care workers were praised widely as heroes by people across the country, including all levels of government. Since the pandemic began to fade, he said nurses and health care workers have gone from being called heroes by the provincial government and their employer, to being treated as zeroes. It's not surprising, we are a female-dominated profession, said Davidson Marcon. We consistently have been told that we are worthless, and that the work that we do does not have value; and that's across the board in female-dominated professions. That's really unfortunate because we are specialized and we have multiple different types of training, education, and specialties. Some of our nurses come from the hospital sector, which brings that expertise as well. We have other nurses that have been in the health unit for a very long time, who we know were former teachers; people with a Bachelors of Public Health. Our nursing is a different type of nursing, but we are upstream. We are hoping that the work that we do can help to reduce the burden on the hospital system. Because I can tell you coming from the hospital system, it has been on fire, and the government has been throwing gasoline on it. The amount of agency nurses and the waste that is being spent unnecessarily on inflated costs because there aren't enough nurses in the hospital system is just dismantling the system. By dismantling the health-care system, Davidson Marcon noted it could aid in the Ford government's push to privatize public health-care in Ontario. As a nurse and an advocate for public health-care, he sees the privatization of public health-care as big very costly step backwards, in terms of the quality of care being provided to the overwhelming majority of Ontarians. Privatization, who does it help? It helps out the 'haves', declared Davidson Marcon. The 'have nots' are the ones that will be impacted the most; and they are being impacted the most. But unfortunately the government doesn't care about those people, because they aren't their constituents in their minds. Those people for us are the people that we fight for, and we advocate for. We advocate for the people who have no voice, who might not have services because they don't have a family doctor. For new immigrants who don't yet have residency. We fight for everybody. Highlighting how passionate the 50 registered nurses, public health nurses and registered practical nurses currently on strike are about the care and services they provide their patients, Davidson Marcon said this passion is part of the reason why it is typically so rare to see a public health strike. ONA's nurses are so dedicated to their profession, he said they have been willing to sacrifice their personal income to continue to help others. This stance that we took is to show that enough is enough; and, that our nurses are suffering, struggling and we must stand up for ourselves. We took a stand and we will be out there as long as we have to be. In a statement to the media released on Aug. 25, ONA expressed their outrage with the councils of Hastings and Prince Edward counties, and the City of Belleville, for denying requests from public health nurses and a county resident to speak to elected county officials and city officials. According to the statement, county clerks for Hastings council and Prince Edward counties council, as well as the clerk for the City of Belleville, cited the wish to not interfere with ongoing collective bargaining talks as their reason for denying the requests to address council members. Noting that there are not any negotiations taking place at the moment, Davidson Marcon doubts the three councils' reason for not allowing the nurses and public health advocate to speak with them directly. During this process, he said ONA offered their employer the opportunity to engage with them in voluntary arbitration, which would have allowed them to prevent, or at least temporarily avoid the strike. Explaining to Bancroft This Week how voluntary arbitration would have worked, Davidson Marcon said both ONA and the board of health could have presented their side of the argument to an unbiased arbitrator, who would then decide what a fair increase would be. Based on recent arbitrational work done for other nurses in Ontario, we feel that we deserve more than what they're offering; and, we feel that we are worth more than what they're offering, Davidson Marcon said. Our employer is able to spend more money on new director positions, and on more board meeting rooms when they have ample space at the office; but they aren't willing to spend it on their frontline workers. He continued, The tides are changing! Across Canada there are lots of strikes, and people are actually standing up for themselves. We are workers just like the Metro workers and those in the other areas that are on strike. They are all fighting for reasonable wage increases because inflation and cost of living has been unreasonable for so long. And we haven't seen a cost of living increase in a very, very long time at least for my whole career? How is anybody expected to continue like this? We have a duty to protect the future as well.