

Historic OPS meeting prepares activists for the fight ahead

175 OPS leaders came out of their **fightback meeting** June 17-18 with a plan to protect good jobs and defend quality public services.

The government has disclosed to the bargaining agents that 1,900 positions in the OPS will be eliminated by March 31 of next year. Members whose positions will be cut will receive what are called 'pre-surplus notices' on July 14.

At least 1,100 jobs will be eliminated from the OPSEU bargaining unit – or 53 per cent of the total cuts. This number could rise to 1,400 – or 60 per cent of the total cuts – because the government plans to cut a further 250 jobs but has not identified the positions as of yet.

This round of layoffs does not include the 1,500 jobs that the McGuinty government has announced it will cut next year.

OPSEU's fightback campaign has two fronts: the first one is the protection of members who are job-threatened. The second is a community campaign to publicize the consequences of the cuts in the upcoming election campaign.

Activists were told that their first priority is to identify and track any bargaining unit vacancies within the OPS so that members will have options if facing layoff or downsizing. Once identified, vacancies should be reported to the Ministry Enforcement and Renewal Committees (MERCs) so that a co-ordinated strategy can be put in place to deal with the impact of layoffs.

Activists were also reminded to ensure that they are available for their members on July 14 when surplus notices are issued.

Activists were given an overview of the surplussing procedure along with what rights and entitlements members will have during this process. Staff representatives will be the locals' first resource if any questions or concerns arise.

Activists received a CD with tools and resources to help them enforce the contract and mobilize in the workplace.

On July 14, which has been dubbed "Pink Slip Day", members in the OPS will be asked to wear a pink band-aid with the message "Cuts Hurts Us All". This will demonstrate our strength and support for one another which will help those directly affected by the cuts. As we get closer to this date, more information will be available on how you can join in

The second front of the campaign will be aimed at the Oct. 6 provincial election.

In order to track the impact of the cuts in the coming months, members were asked to e-mail opscutswatch@opseu.org with answers to the following questions:

1. What is the impact of the job cut(s) on the public and/or client group that uses the service?
2. Where is the work going? (E.g. redistributed among colleagues, transferred to another level of government or to a BPS agency, privatized, or no plan.)

Activists were reminded that to be effective we must always remember to talk about the work we do on behalf of the people of Ontario. The term "public services" can be vague to many people. By talking specifically about the work we do, (I protect water, I keep dangerous trucks off the road, I protect your health card from fraud), it brings home to people how cuts will negatively affect them.

OPSEU President Warren (Smokey) Thomas urged members to get involved in all election-related events in their ridings during the summer and fall.

"It's up to us to tell our friends, families and neighbours how valuable our work is to the people of Ontario," said Thomas.

To guide the strategic direction of the fightback campaign, President Thomas, in consultation with the Central Enforcement and Renewal Committee (CERC), will appoint a Provincial Co-ordinating Group (PCG). OPSEU Staff representatives will be calling on local presidents to form Area Co-ordinating Groups (ACGs). The ACGs will receive direction from the PCG and help co-ordinate activities and bolster support in the locals.

Activists were also reminded that the OPS contract expires at the end of 2012. This fightback campaign will be our first opportunity as a group to set the tone for those upcoming negotiations, which will likely take place in an extremely hostile political environment.

Over the course of the day and a half meeting, activists heard from a number of speakers including President Thomas, First Vice-President/Treasurer Eduardo (Eddy) Almeida, CERC Chair Roxanne Barnes, and Corrections MERC Chair Dan Sidsworth. Executive Board Members attended the meeting and participated in the brainstorming sessions. Staff from Job Security, Local Services and Communications were facilitators and resources.

Activists were given an overview of the McGuinty government's plans for the OPS from the provincial Budget, as well as the Progressive Conservatives' election platform. Activists learned that the Liberals and Tories share the same agenda: cuts to jobs and services, reduced wages, benefits and pensions and the privatization of services.

At lunch time on the Friday, members participated in political activities. They handed out flyers, "Why should you care about cuts to public services?" at major intersections in downtown Toronto and showed their support for locked-out members of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) by joining a nearby picket line.

Members were given a global perspective on challenging the so-called "austerity" agenda from York University professor of political economy David McNally. He told activists that 90 per cent of the world is being asked to pay for the excesses of less than 10 per cent. He said Canada today is more unequal than at any point since the 1920s. McNally pointed out governments around the world spent \$21 trillion dollars of public money bailing out the banks to prevent a financial meltdown in 2008. This is the equivalent to all the goods and services produced by the U.S. economy in the span of 18 months.

McNally defined 'austerity' as meaning citizens pay for the financial crisis by losing the public services we depend on. He said building coalitions of unions, social justice groups, and youth is critical to fighting drastic spending cuts. He said he was humbled to hear about the specific work OPSEU members do for the people of Ontario and he wished us well in our fight.

The fightback meeting was opened with a moment of silence for OPSEU member Amber Lynn Booth, a student worker in the OPS, who died June 6 in a head-on collision while travelling to her job at a provincial park. This was Amber Lynn's third summer working in the OPS. She had aspirations to be a Conservation Officer.