

OPSEU workers take action in Bancroft



By Nate Smelle

Negotiations between the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) and the Provincial government began on Nov. 20, 2014, however, according to OPS mobilizer Chris Johnston there has been very little bargaining taking place. OPSEU represents all frontline Ministry employees who work directly for the Ontario government, and since the current collective agreement expired on Dec. 31, 2014 its members have been showing up to work without a contract. On Thursday, Jan. 22 a team of OPSEU members from the Bancroft Region formed a picket line in front of the Service Ontario building on Hwy. 28 in Bancroft to help make their voices heard. The Bancroft picket was part of a larger series of job actions held across the province last week. "We want to let people know that we are in contract negotiations, that they are generally not going well," said Johnston. "We want to be clear in our message that we are not asking for 10 per cent wage increases; we are not asking for huge wage increases; we are hoping for a cost-of-living. We haven't had an increase in the last two years. We want to be clear that we are only asking for a fair and reasonable contract, we're not asking for the moon." According to Johnston, when the bargaining process began back in November, the Province presented the union with a contract offer that was completely unacceptable. "At that time the Province put down a contract offer with lots and lots of concessions and cuts to our benefits," he said. "The government's idea of bargaining up to today is that those concessions are still on the table. Bargaining is supposed to be...well you want this and we want that, and then a process of figuring out how we can come to some sort of fair conclusion...that's just not happening. We are really concerned that there's a high potential of the labour disruption and a strike. That's one of the things we're doing is trying to get out into communities and let people know what's going on, and that there is potential for labour disruption." Johnston said that the Province has been constantly trying to privatize bits of the OPS since the Mike Harris Conservative government began cutting back the public sector in 1996. Johnston explained that the big problem they are trying to highlight in some of the smaller towns like Bancroft is that the privatization of the OPS will take money out of the community. "When a private company does the work the money doesn't stay in Bancroft, those wages go elsewhere," Johnston said. "With the outdoors card for example it's a company in Tennessee that makes those profits so we are trying to highlight that. What the auditor general recently highlighted was that the government spent an extra \$8 billion on services for the public because they have privatized these services. If the public servants would've done that work it would have been \$8 billion cheaper is what the auditor said. They are spending a ton of money and we provide important services for small towns, and big towns, and we want people to know that." The Province's offer on Nov. 20 has been labelled by OPSEU members as "mean-spirited," for stripping away benefits already accrued by the workers, and for reducing the wages and benefits of any new hires. "They don't want to invest in their employees," he said. "The other thing the contract offer does is it really attacks new workers and new people coming in. They want to start the wage grid much lower for new people. They don't want people to have certain benefits and that's always a slippery slope, because that means our new hires will not have access to good benefits and wages in the future. It's a huge step backwards." Senior IRM forestry technician with the Ministry of Natural Resources in Bancroft, Glenn McLean, told Bancroft This Week that the last contract they accepted came with a two-year wage freeze and a few small takeaways. The current offer delivers nothing in the plus column. "When I look at this next contract offer, there's not one thing," said McLean.

?Usually they throw you some carrots and it's a negotiation, right, but this is all takeaways and negatives, it's disheartening. I'm not sure what bargaining in bad faith is but it seems like that's what this is. I'm just like everybody else. The Hydro bill keeps going up, so does the telephone bill and our grocery bills. The cost of everything's going up but our wages have flat-lined. That's the reality of the situation, and a lot of people are in that same reality.? McLean said the offer on the table would bring about a pay freeze for the next four years without providing an increase for cost-of-living. For McLean though it is about more than just fair wages. It is also about having access to the resources he needs to do his job well, and maintain the level of service he is able to provide to the community. By doing his job well, McLean feels he can do his part in looking after Ontario's rights. ?The job I do is in the forestry sector, so I'm making sure what's done out there is done in accordance with the plans and the rules? he said. ?I don't have to care about the money. If they can't make money doing that's really unfortunate and I appreciate that, but I care about the streams and the trees and that's what I am paid to do. I like that part of my job. I don't have to care how much money you're going to make harvesting trees I just want to make sure you do it right.? ?If you work for a private company at the end of the day it's about making money always, it has to be and I get that; otherwise you don't make money and you go out of business. Private companies will get into situations where they have to cut corners, and where they don't follow regulations because they have to make money, but I don't do that ever because my job is to make sure that it's done right.?