

Healthcare workers hold call to action campaign

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?Respect Us. Protect Us. Pay Us.?

Dufferin Oaks healthcare staff marched to Shelburne Town Hall on Monday (March 8), International Women's Day, as part of a call to action campaign organized by three major unions.

Unifor, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), who represent 175,000 healthcare workers across the province announced the launch of the campaign on March 7. The campaign demands immediate actions from the Ontario government and Premier Doug Ford to fix what the unions and healthcare workers say is a broken system.

?The lack of respect for care work has become painfully evident during COVID-19, but it stems from a longstanding failure to recognize the value of this work simply because women are performing it,? said Katha Fortier, Assistant to the National President, Unifor. ?This is evidenced by workers in health and long-term care who are often precariously employed and not paid a living wage. Full-time work with benefits is rarely available and they are forced to work at multiple jobs to simply survive.?

As part of the call to action the unions are asking the government to turn part-time work into full-time, providing paid-sick leave for COVID-19 related illnesses, provide needed PPE, and making the \$4 hour ?pandemic pay? available to all healthcare workers and permanent.

The unions are also asking for a raise in the base pay for personal support workers (PSWs) to \$25/hr.

Around a dozen healthcare workers from Dufferin Oaks, including personal support workers (PSWs), register practical nurses (RPNs), dietary, administration, and housekeeping staff took part in the rally.

Kara Purdy, a staff member at Dufferin Oaks and a CUPE union member spoke with the Free Press about the march for change.

?It's a mobilized event to send a message to the provincial government that we need more help and assistance,? said Purdy. ?Health care workers across the province have made huge sacrifices personally so they can continue to do the work necessary to care for our residents, clients, and patients of our community.?

?People working in healthcare need more support, they need to protect us, respect us, and pay us. The three statements, protect us by providing us with PPE and if you don't have PPE available tell us, don't keep those numbers hidden. Respect us, we've been working around the clock enormous extended hours of overtime, denied vacation time. Pay us, don't just pay the PSW classification because we recognize that there's a staff shortage in the classification, and give everybody the pandemic pay that's working in healthcare.?

Sherry Cornelius, is the head cook at Dufferin Oaks, and spoke about the staff shortages that have been seen in the healthcare field, and the struggle for equal pay among workers.

?A lot of people don't want to work in LTC (long-term care) right now because they're afraid and unfortunately a lot of LTC has made it so many positions are casual in part-time, that doesn't make it any easier for people to work in the field because you're not guaranteed full-time wage,? she noted.

Speaking to the pandemic pay offered to some healthcare workers, Purdy said it shows how valuable, heroic, and dedicated this

gender specific workforce is.

?Pandemic pay, the initial \$4.00, needs to be paid to all health care workers working in the field, not just a classification that is showing a provincial wide shortage of PSWs,? she remarked.

A staff study released by the province in 2020 showed that long-term care home staff in Ontario made an average of \$22.69/hr compared to PSWs who made \$17.30 for at home or community care.

?We're lucky here at Dufferin Oaks, we're proud county workers and the staff are paid well, but throughout Ontario frontline workers are doing back breaking work, then not being recognized, they're not getting support and they're not getting the pay that they deserve,? said Purdy.

In October of 2020 the Ontario government said it would be supporting personal support workers and direct support workers in home and community care, long-term care, public hospitals and social service sectors by investing \$461 million in temporary enhanced wages. Temporary pay increases were between \$2 and \$3.

The temporary enhanced wages expires on March 31.