

What the Situation of Personal Support Workers Is Telling Us

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USW Local 1005 has been holding weekly meetings every Thursday since 2003 to discuss matters of importance to the workers. At our Thursday meeting on February 13 we had a lively discussion on the situation facing personal support workers (PSWs) in Ontario and what their plight is telling us.

Local 1005 President Gary Howe asked me to report on the situation, which is well documented in the study that was commissioned from the Ontario Health Coalition by Unifor.^[1] The Coalition did a tour of various cities, including Hamilton, and held press conferences around the province to popularize the results.

At the Thursday meeting we dealt with some of the issues raised in that study and at the press conference held in Hamilton on February 10. Two weeks earlier at our meeting we also addressed the situation and many workers spoke of their own experiences of trying to put someone into long term care, the struggle it entailed and the many problems they had to deal with once they were there.

Right now, about 80,000 people are in long term care in Ontario with 30,000 people on waiting lists, which can result in a delay of five years or more. Long term care is residential care in a home for those who can no longer function on their own due to medical conditions that require assistance. In the 2018 Ontario general election, the parties promised to create more long term care homes. Doug Ford himself committed to building homes for 15,000 people within five years. Whether it happens or not, the problem is that the system does not have enough personal support workers to take care of the 80,000 people already in care. According to the report, even if a seniors' home is staffed according to the current rules, the homes are short-staffed because no one is available to replace staff when sick, on holidays or on days off.



Staff have to run from one room to the next to try to bathe people, maintain them, and the situation just snowballs. This is bad enough in terms of the patients, but then personal support workers begin to be abused from all sides because of the situation. They are forced to work double shifts. They have no days off. They do not know their schedules ahead of time. Many are part-time workers juggling two long-term care jobs and having to balance schedules, disrupting their lives. Listening to what these personal support workers in long term care homes say about their working conditions, they are a nightmare.

We steelworkers recalled that in our industry it took a long fight just to achieve regular schedules. If you have no protection of regular shifts, the company abuses you. Without this protection, you do not know beforehand what shift you are working or your days off, causing havoc in your life. We fought for years to have our schedules set, to know our work schedule in advance. And if the company violates the schedule, a penalty exists such as paying time-and-a-half, and other measures to enforce the rule.

The other sector with a huge problem is home care. This is where hospitals say they are overcrowded, blaming those they call "bed blockers" who do not need hospital care and should be in long-term care but are stuck in the hospital because no long-term care beds are available.

The "solution" is that while the government promises to eventually build more long-term care homes, they want more people to go into home care, whether it is suitable for them or not. The authorities blame the people for overcrowding the hospitals and use this excuse as justification for putting vulnerable people and the workers who look after them into unacceptable conditions.

Home care is said to be the cheapest because you are in your own home, but require some care, and personal support workers are sent to take care of you at home. That is what is being said, but of course it is cheaply done on the backs of workers and those needing care. Wages are lower for home care workers, with many of them barely making minimum wage. Their travel time is not paid. They have to use their own vehicles. They are on call, running from one home to the next with no support.

The report puts forward a number of demands to address the crisis in long-term care. One of them is to guarantee four hours of care per day for the patients. That means four hours in the course of a day, time for a bath and time to deal with medical problems, where personal support workers and nurses can effectively provide four hours of care a day. That is one of the goals they are raising to change the situation for the better. Currently it is nowhere near that level.

We also discussed at our meeting an article in the local paper, which explains that hospitals do not receive proper funding for medical equipment. They are forced to fundraise, do lotteries and beg for charity through donations and contributions from philanthropists. Hospital equipment is not covered by government funding. I said that when the army needs jets or tanks, then they should have a bake sale or a lottery and raise money from people who want to support the military. How can hospitals or any modern enterprise be run like that?

A year or two ago a petition was circulated in Ontario asking who supports a cut in funding for hospitals. Of course 99.99 per cent of the people said *No!*, they do not want to cut funding for hospitals yet that is exactly what is being done. When these parties get into Parliament or Queen's Park all of the sudden they find all kinds of excuses to cut funding for health care and other social programs, such as Ford is doing to education. The Ontario Liberals, before the Ford government came to power, froze hospital funding for 10 years, which is actually a major cut because of the combined factors of an aging population, increased needs, greater population and price inflation.

Cuts to health care funding are the demand of an important section of the financial oligarchy and that is what rules in parliament and legislatures. Besides, the people who are in power in the legislature figure that they are going to be OK. They have money, they have connections, they will not go into these long-term care homes, which lack resources and workers. They are making decisions that impose conditions on others that they themselves will not experience.

When discussing what the situation of personal support workers is telling us, we pointed out at our meeting that people are grappling with why something as important and basic as health care, which is such a priority for the people, is not dealt with seriously by those in power in the parliament and legislatures. They do precisely the opposite of what people want, which shows that the people are not empowered and that the lack of empowerment is the fundamental problem facing society. The present political system blocks the people from solving the problems they and society face. What modern political forms are necessary to turn the situation

around to empower the people politically? That is a problem worth taking up as a priority as it lies at the root of all other problems.

Note

1. [Caring in Crisis: Ontario's Long-Term Care PSW Shortage - Report & recommendations from the front lines across Ontario - Commissioned from the Ontario Health Coalition by Unifor - January 2020](#)