

THE LOCAL

OPSEU 560 NEWSLETTER- DECEMBER 2020

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Contact the Local

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Workload
Monitoring Group:
wmg@opseu560.org

All other issues:
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@opseu560.org

When contacting the Local please use a non-Seneca email account. It helps us maintain the confidentiality and integrity of communications.

President's Address

Frank Yee, President, Local 560

As this challenging year comes to a close, I want to address the restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic that have blurred the lines of workspace and working hours. With the transition to online teaching and working from home, professional duties are becoming intertwined with personal obligations. The lack of work-life balance has been a tremendous challenge for academic workers. A recent survey by The Canadian Teachers' Federation found that 44% of respondents have concerns with their mental health and well being. Now more than ever, academic workers are experiencing a rise in concern over their mental



health.

There is no doubt that Seneca needs innovative and sustained solutions to secure the mental well-being of its employees. Mental health must be a central element in any local or national COVID-19 recovery plan. Seneca professors are facing "teacher burnout" and as online classes become the new norm, mental health issues will likely continue to be a growing concern if not addressed by the administration, preferably in consultation with the Union.

Faculty often feel as though they are expendable or that they have to choose between their jobs and their health. Not only have COVID-19 restrictions exacerbated feelings of helplessness, but faculty are feeling a sense of loss and powerlessness in the transition to online classes. I have spoken with many members who indicate that they cannot manage a workday that does not end when they turn their computer off. International students send emails at all times of the day, which collide with sleep schedules and time off from work.

This lack of work-life balance is a heavy contributor to the mental health issues faced by faculty. The College may argue otherwise, but members have reported that they have added at least two hours to their workdays through one-on-one consultations with students as well as email correspondence at all times of the day, to accommodate the different time zones of international students. As one of the GTA's top ten employers, it is time that Seneca College took a firm stance in paving the way for solutions to these unique problems faced by members.

President David Agnew's recent publication on the issuance of stipends and added vacation days for full-time faculty (not to contract partial-load professors), shows that the College is taking a backseat in addressing the issues that come with rapid change, increased workload, lack of proper support and increased stress.

In response to President Agnew's "Christmas Gift" I questioned the inequity of this offering—a meager \$350 offered to Full-Time faculty, contrasted by the even more frugal \$175 given to Contract faculty. Not only is Seneca ignoring the hurdles of transitioning to working from home, but it is also adding to the mental duress faced by Contract faculty who may have had to incur out-of-pocket expenses to perform their professional duties.

At a recent UCC meeting, the Director of Employee and Labour Relations stated that Seneca was the only College to recognize staff with a stipend. My response is that Seneca College reduced the academic term from 14 to 12 weeks while charging the same tuition to the students, in the name of COVID-19. The College has saved many thousands of dollars for every shortened contract to our precarious Partial-Load faculty – some stipend, some stipend!

Furthermore, the additional vacation days promised to all faculty were only directed to Full-Time staff; as Partial-Load, Part-Time and Sessional faculty would be out of contract and therefore ineli-

gible. I requested that President Agnew to increase and equalize the stipends and extend the vacation days to all faculty.

Seneca College must meet its own standards of equity and equality that are the foundations of the Au Large Project. We must proactively care for the mental health of teaching faculty. We must move forward with the “new normal” with innovative and equitable solutions.

If any member requires guidance or support concerning mental well-being, I encourage you to reach out to the Local at union@opseu560.org.

Please remember to stay safe and take all the minimum health precautions of wearing an approved face mask. Maintain physical distancing and frequent washing of hands, and reduce social gatherings with immediate family members or within your social circle.

On behalf of your Union Local, I'd like to wish all members a safe and restful holiday season.

In Solidarity,
Frank Yee

FIRST VICE PRESIDENT'S STATEMENT
Anna Ainsworth, 1st Vice President, Local 560

Dear members,

As some of you know, in spring of 2019 I was elected to serve on the Executive Board of OPSEU. For context, OPSEU represents 155, 000 public sector workers in Ontario—LCBO employees, many hospital employees, correctional Officers, Faculty and Staff at the 24 colleges, Ministry workers, Child and Protective care workers, Faculty and Staff at some universities, lab Technicians, and many other professional designations.

The union is divided into seven geographic regions. Here, in the GTA, we are part of Region five, and we have 55, 000 members. Each region elects three Executive Board Members to govern the union between the annual Conventions. I was one of the three Board Members for Region five.

Two weeks ago, at a Board meeting, a motion was put to the floor to cancel Regional elections (scheduled for March 2021) and Convention (April 2021) where we were also to hold elections for the President and Vice President of the union. Effectively, the motion extended the terms of Board members, the President and Vice President, by a year. I strongly opposed this motion on the grounds that it was undemocratic for a body to extend its own term, that the membership had not been consulted, that the claims that online elections were unreliable rang hollow, and that there was an overt conflict of interest for the Board

to vote on its own duration. I announced that I would resign from the Board, should the Board vote in favour. 12 of 21 Board Members voted in favour. I found the violation of our democracy untenable and resigned from the Executive Board of OPSEU.

I would like to reassure you that I continue to serve as Vice President of OPSEU 560, and will keep requesting that we hold elections because our mandate ended last Spring. Our members gave us a mandate of two years. The pandemic extended that time line, but we are now in a position where online elections are possible. Because we would be facing an election system other than an in-person paper ballot, according to our Constitution, we require the permission of the Union President, Warren (Smokey) Thomas, to allow us to hold online elections. So far President Thomas has denied us that right.

Finally, I also want to let you know that two years ago I was elected to serve as an alternate for our Divisional Executive. The Divisional Executive is a five person elected body that oversees the 24 College Faculty locals in the province. Recently, one of the members of our Divisional Executive stepped down, so I was asked to assume the role on the Divisional Executive. I gladly accepted and now serve on the Divisional Executive of CAAT-A.

I would like to wrap up by wishing everyone a restful and peaceful holiday season, and a wonderful 2021. Not to sound overtly optimistic, but 2021 can only be better than 2020. We have persevered through 2020. We will tackle 2021 together, supporting each other and in solidarity with all our colleagues.

All the best in the coming year,
Anna Ainsworth,
First Vice President

T2200 Tax Forms

As a result of COVID-19 restrictions, many employees nationwide were directed to work from home in March 2020. The requirement of a T2200 tax form to claim expenses related to working from home became a national topic which the government has recently addressed.

The Canada Revenue Agency has now provided a new T2200 form and a streamlined procedure in order to claim work-space-in-the-home expenses on your 2020 income tax.

According to the federal government, faculty working from home with “modest expenses” will be able to claim up to \$400 in the 2020 tax year without the need for detailed receipts. Additionally, this streamlined approach does not require the employer to confirm the status of the employee by way of a T2200 form.

Please find more information on the use of the T2200 form [here](#) and [here](#). Please contact the [Union](#) should you need any guidance or support on this matter.



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MENTAL WELLNESS

*Howard A. Doughty, Steward,
King Campus*

Over the past decade, if any issue has generated more comment than a reported crisis in student anxiety, alienation, depression, and even suicide, it's probably faculty burn-out. Across North America, Student Counselling and Human Resources departments have focused on mental wellness with multiple programs aimed at keeping people productive—appropriately happy in our work. And, of course, the perils of Covid-19 have only exacerbated concerns.



At Seneca, HR offers multiple services from aerobics to domestic financial planning to help us cope with stress, keep positive and, if needed, seek professional advice.

No one should denigrate either those who genuinely try to help or those who genuinely need assistance. Especially during the pandemic, only a sadist would mock those with psychological difficulties at home or at workplace.

Whether it's facilitating therapy or (as in my department) just inviting colleagues to share photographs of Fall colours or recipes for the festive season, no sincere attempt to bring comfort and happiness should be dismissed.

That said, most strategies deployed by the college have mainly tried to assist or even fix individuals, helping people "adjust" to unpleasant realities, or promoting the flexibility to muddle through perilous circumstances. Little is done to address the circumstances themselves.

Admittedly, the pattern of epidemiological, ecological, economic, and ethical issues that define working conditions today may be beyond anyone's capacity to reform by themselves; but, saying that problems are systemic is no reason to ignore them. Something could be done; things could be otherwise! In a phrase I recall from Everett Knight's *The Objective Society* (1959): "therapy is a course, in resignation!" Sure, people need immediate help; but, the best kind of help is to remove the cause of distress, not learn to put up with it.

Professors in nursing, social work, and the "helping professions" know that both physical and mental illness have social causes. In fact, poverty is the chief determinant of disease and, although most of us aren't destitute, many precarious faculty survive at or near the official poverty line. And there are other kinds of hardship.

It would be absurdly optimistic to imagine that the upper echelons of management and the authorities at Queen's Park will alter working conditions to cut off emotional harm at the root. Although every dollar spent on prevention results in thirty dollars saved in acute care, our organizational and political superiors seek economic efficiencies above all; they are a waste of time and money.

Protective of their powers, indifferent to our stake in determining the academic process, and in thrall to their corporate ideology, our "administrative superiors" would do well to take time over the break to read a book by psychoanalyst Erich Fromm (*The Sane Society*, 1955) or, if they are feeling especially frisky, perhaps one by Herbert Marcuse (*One-Dimensional Man*, 1964). Both were popular when I was a student. Both remain relevant today. Both make clear that collegial governance is fundamental to a truly healthy work environment, basic to building education back better, and essential in any college worthy of the name.

"In 1995, then Ontario education minister John Snobelen was caught on video explaining his plan to "create a useful crisis" in order to shift public perception of the state of education in the province and push legislation that models education as a business. Now, twenty-five years on, his words are a prescient reflection of the current provincial Conservative leadership's handling of the pandemic."

Inori Roy, "The Epidemic of Teacher Burnout,"
The Walrus - December 20, 2020

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What do Sick Days Mean for Online Teaching?

Jonathan Singer, V.P. Equity, Local 560

One aspect of our shift to Emergency Remote Teaching that has led to some questions or confusion has been the issue of sick days.

On the one hand, the flexibility associated with asynchronous online teaching may reduce the chances that illness will disrupt our work. On the other hand, working online may cause its own health problems that interfere with our ability to complete our work, whether it be eyestrain or headaches from staring at a screen, or back pain from prolonged sitting.

Article 17.01 F1 of our Collective Agreement (downloadable from www.opseu560.org) applies to all full-time faculty – I'll discuss Partial-Load faculty below. This article reads:

During absences due to illness or injury, participating employees who would otherwise be scheduled to work shall receive 100% of regular pay for up to and including 20 working days in any one benefit year, plus any unused credits carried forward from previous years.

On the i3 system, instead of a record of sick days, full-time faculty are provided with a record of sick hours. They can convert their sick hours to sick days by dividing the figure on i3 by 8.8 (since a work-week of up to 44 hours divided by 5 days = 8.8 work-hours per day).

It is the Union's understanding that the use of sick days means that members are not obliged to complete work that they were scheduled to complete on those days. This interpretation is supported by the fact that reporting a sick day on i3 will result in a deduction of 8.8 hours (including hours for prep, teaching, evaluation, and out-of-class assistance to students) from the member's "bank" of sick hours.

In short, a sick day means not only that members are not obliged to work on that day, but that they are not expected to complete 1/5 of the work that they would otherwise be expected to complete in that week.

One gets a better sense of the issue by thinking about the faculty member who is sick for one week. Five sick days – 44 hours – will be deducted from their bank, to reflect 44 hours of scheduled work that was not completed.

All of which is to say, that it is unreasonable for the College to expect faculty to take a sick day *while still doing all of the work that that sick*

day represents.

Taking a sick day, for example, should result in a reduction of the amount of grading that members are obliged to complete, and if members are completing all of that work at a different time, then they may wish to discuss with their managers a) whether a sick day should be recorded, and b) any overtime implications if they are expected to complete any missed work upon return, in addition to work that they would normally do at that time.

In short, if you are taking one or more sick days, it would be appropriate to reach out to your manager, to discuss what teaching and grading will not be completed as a result of your reduction of 8.8 sick-hours per day, and to discuss how, when, and by whom that work will be completed.

Partial-Load Faculty

Partial-Load faculty are compensated based on Teaching Contact Hours, they are also entitled to 100% pay for Teaching Hours missed due to illness or injury. Those hours are prorated, based upon the number of hours they teach weekly and the length of their contract. The number of hours per contract that a Partial-Load faculty member may miss with full pay is listed in Article 26.08B.

As a ballpark estimate, a Partial-Load faculty member who is on a contract that spans four calendar months is entitled to miss 1.5 weeks of teaching and all associated work due to illness or injury.

Again, missing Teaching Hours implies that the member will not be expected to complete other work associated with that missed teaching, including preparation and evaluation.

It is the Union's understanding that that any Partial-Load faculty member who takes a sick day should be expected to a significant reduction of the work that they are expected to accomplish in that week, and that the member should not be expected to complete that work in the following week, for no additional pay.

As in the case of Full-Time faculty, if Partial-Load faculty are unable to complete work due to illness or injury, it is appropriate for them to inform their managers what work they will not be able to complete, and to have a discussion about when, how, and by whom that work is expected to be done.

The Seneca Employee Survey

Howard A. Doughty, Steward, King Campus

The results are in! According to President Agnew, almost 2000 Seneca employees gave a bracing endorsement to the further entrenchment of automated education and the promotion of the digital diploma mills that are central to Premier Ford's vision of higher education.

The independent contractor that designed and administered the survey says we enjoy working online by a ratio of seven-to-one. Even more of us think we're as productive off-campus as on. Over 78% of us say that we want to continue working from home after the pandemic—over half urging that we work remotely 80% to 100% of the time.

Seldom has technochauvenism been given such apparent approval by the workers who are subjected to it. And the icing on the cake is that, when asked if they would recommend Seneca as an employer to others, President Agnew says: "An amazing 88 per cent of you said yes—just three per cent said no—which is our highest-ever positive response to that question." Plainly, we could hardly be happier!

What gives?

As constructed, the survey doesn't explore why people feel as they do. As a privileged full-time teacher who lives within walking distance of my campus, I can easily imagine why an underpaid, overworked, disrespected, part-time professor would choose to work from home. The college has made appearing

on campus as unattractive as possible for everyone and has especially disincentivized those who drive or take a bus through traffic to teach one class and who lack even the minimal amenities (a "work station," never mind even a cramped, noisy, shared office) while they are present.

As for the several classifications of employees, the survey dumps management, support staff, full-time, partial-load and part-time academic employees into the same bin. I'd be fascinated to learn how the responses differed among the various job classifications. Members of management, I suspect, are almost congenitally designed, as the old song says, "to ac-cen-tu-ate the positive" while many dissenters are apt to ignore the survey altogether—believing (correctly) that it is meant to serve no good purpose other than to buoy up managerial mythologies.

What to do?

If such research is to be performed at all, the college should convene a joint employer-employee committee, task force (call it what you will) to formulate an institutional goals and performance inventory in pursuit of excellence in a common enterprise. Proper questions should be asked, answered, and subjected to rigorous, critical analysis. Then, a collegially determined assessment should be completed.

Meanwhile, what we have here is pretty much a case study in "confirmation bias" and, as they say in Scotland, "he who pays the piper calls the tune." As it stands, transparency would help to reveal the flaws in this particular exercise in managerial self-justification. Absent good-faith co-determination, the Seneca Survey is merely grist for the corporate propaganda machine.



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Email: union@opseu560.org

Local 560 Website: www.opseu560.org

You may find contact information for a particular steward on our website at:

<https://opseu560.org/about-local-560/directory-of-stewards/>

To All our Members

WISHING YOU

HAPPY HOLIDAYS

AND A WONDERFUL NEW YEAR

From your OPSEU Local Union Representatives



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