

Strikes at two Ontario family health organizations heating up

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WRITTEN BY MARK CARDWELL ON JULY 31, 2018 FOR CANADIANHEALTHCARENETWORK.CA

The rhetoric is heating up between doctors, workers and union leaders over summer-long strikes at two Ontario Family Health Organizations (FHOs).

But a leading Toronto labour lawyer said that's to be expected when personal pride, economic pressures and communication come into play in workplace conflicts—and mediation may be the best solution.

The two strikes are occurring at FHOs in Thunder Bay and Owen Sound. Though they involve different unions, both the demands by the striking workers and the refusal by doctors to negotiate are similar.

The Owen Sound conflict, however, is marked by a much more rancorous war of words.

The [latest salvo](#) came on July 27 from Ontario Medical Association president-elect Dr. Sohail Gandhi.

In a blog posted on Friday, Dr. Gandhi, a family doctor in Collingwood, blasted a provincial union leader for the second time this month over the strike at the FHO in Owen Sound, an hour's drive west along the southern coast of Georgian Bay (Dr. Gandhi was clear in his post, however, that he was not speaking on behalf of the OMA).

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“Last week I suggested that Ontario Public Services Employees Union (OPSEU) President Warren ‘Smokey’ Thomas should change his approach on how he dealt with physicians in union disputes,” Dr. Gandhi wrote. “Sadly, Smokey has doubled down on his tactics. In doing so he utterly and completely failed his members (and) risks endangering healthcare in Owen Sound.”

Dr. Gandhi was responding to comments made by Thomas, who ripped doctors at the Owen Sound clinic after contract talks aimed at ending the three-month-long strike there broke down in mid July.

Thomas, a registered practical nurse and head of the 155,000-member OPSEU, which represents the Owen Sound workers, blamed the FHO's 22 doctors for the impasse with their 30 striking employees, who include a registered nurse and other clinical and office support staff.

“I can't believe the arrogance and the shameful greed of these doctors,” Thomas said in an OPSEU [press release](#). “They're selling out their dedicated employees to stuff their pockets with as many public dollars as they can, they're punch drunk with greed.”

Thomas has made similar comments in media interviews, including one this week with the *Medical Post*.

He has also called on both Ontario's new health minister and Owen Sound city council to intervene in the conflict and for the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario to investigate the doctors involved.

In his defence of the doctors, Dr. Gandhi wrote that “like all other payment models the FHO models experienced years of deep cuts to their budgets during the desultory tenure of Premier Kathleen Wynne.

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Dr. Gandhi also slammed Thomas for trying to involve Ontario's medical regulator in the labour dispute.

“By going down this road, in what seems to be a desperate attempt to prove his worth, Smokey has caused a toxic meltdown to the point where there is no hope of a resolution,” wrote Dr. Gandhi.

Though the language is less heated in the second FHO dispute—the Port Arthur Health Centre in Thunder Bay—tensions are high there as well.

Sixty-five clinic workers, all of them women, have been on the picket lines in front of the clinic during opening hours daily since Apr. 9.

They are seeking higher wages and more predictable working hours.

On Monday, the striking women and union representatives from Unifor held a weekly rally at noon in front of the clinic.

Later they made a presentation on the conflict at a city council meeting in Thunder Bay.

The strikers notably showed municipal officials a video of the strike that has been viewed 130,000 times on the Facebook page of Unifor, which represents some 315,000 workers in 20 different economic sectors against Canada.

“Our members have been on strike for 112 days now,” Katha Fortier, special assistant to Unifor president Jerry Dias and a participant in yesterday's activities, said today in a phone interview.

Fortier said the owners of the clinic, who she believes include three of the more than 30 physicians who work there, have refused multiple requests from both the union and the Ontario Labour Relations Board to negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement.

“It's time for the employer to get back to negotiations,” said Fortier. “All these women want are fair living wages and an end to years of contract employment.”

Neither FHO returned phone and email requests for interviews.

Though he is not involved with either conflict, prominent Toronto labour and employment lawyer Michael Sherrard says these kinds of stand offs tend to occur when workers don't feel like they are being treated fairly or respectfully.

“Financial pressures can exacerbate those feelings,” said Sherrard, who represents employers in a broad range of sectors, including healthcare. “It's easy to get a deal when there's lots of money to go around but harder in skinnier economic times.”

Sherrard said mediation could help to break the impasses at both FHOs. Under Ontario labour laws, either side in a conflict can request a mediator.

“I love seeing a conciliator come through the door,” said Sherrard. “A third party that does not have binding authority can help both sides get to a resolution.”