

State of the union: a year of action in 2016

It is impossible to do a short summary of what OPSEU and OPSEU members did in 2016 – there was just too much activity. The OPSEU website lists more than 625 individual news items for 2016, each of which is merely a sign of much greater work and activism behind the scenes. Most of the union’s activities were part of long-running initiatives, making it hard to pinpoint any one time when they happened. The list below is an incomplete sampling of what the union accomplished in the year just past. For a more complete review of OPSEU activities in 2016, including reports on local bargaining and organizing, please review the “[News](#)” section of the website at www.opseu.org.

“Crisis in Corrections” campaign, Ontario Public Service

At the beginning of 2016, OPSEU’s “Crisis in Corrections” campaign to increase staffing, services, and safety in correctional facilities was already at the boiling point and making headlines across the province. With the clock ticking down to a January 9 strike deadline, the Correctional bargaining unit in the Ontario Public Service [signed a tentative agreement](#) that recognized the wage inequities faced by workers in Corrections. The agreement also extracted a promise from the government to create a standalone Correctional bargaining unit – a promise the government kept 11 months later with the passage of [Bill 70](#) (Budget Measures). Just as importantly, the Crisis in Corrections campaign, which continued throughout the year, successfully pushed the Liberals to make [real, concrete investments in correctional services](#).

In July, as part of the larger campaign, OPSEU members who are nurses working in corrections launched [a campaign of their own](#) to tell their stories and call for solutions to the health crisis behind bars.

“Public is Better” campaign for hospitals

In January, in response to the Ontario government’s 2016 pre-budget consultations, OPSEU launched a major [advertising campaign](#) to demand more funding for our public hospitals. The campaign featured [videos](#) and [radio ads](#). The union [continued to fight](#) for public hospitals throughout the year.

Ontario college operations in Saudi Arabia

OPSEU [carried on with its campaign](#) against some Ontario public colleges running campuses in Saudi Arabia, a country in which women need permission from a male guardian to take post-secondary education. Later in the year, Algonquin College announced that it would [leave the desert kingdom](#). As 2016 draws to a close, Niagara College is on the verge of being [censured](#) by the Canadian Association of University Teachers over its Saudi Arabian venture.

2016 Ontario budget

In February, in the run-up to the provincial budget, OPSEU President Warren (Smokey) Thomas [delivered the union's take](#) on the budget priorities of the Liberal government at Queen's Park, which he called "[out of touch](#)" with those of ordinary Ontarians. Later in the spring, Thomas called on the province to [introduce a "Fairness Test"](#) with every budget so every Ontarians would know how budgets affect income inequality in the province.

Tainted blood

In February, [OPSEU joined a national campaign](#) to stop the privatization of the blood supply after a private company opened a paid-donor plasma clinic in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. The union supported the creation of [bloodwatch.org](#), a new national organization that aims to protect the blood supply. The influential [Globe and Mail newspaper agreed](#) with OPSEU's position.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

After a multi-year campaign by unions and NDP MPP Cheri DiNovo, [the Liberal government finally recognized the impact of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder](#) (PTSD) on first responders. Under Bill 163, which became law later in the spring, certain first responders will no longer have to prove that their PTSD is work-related in order to receive support and compensation. However, the new law leaves out several categories of workers who frequently suffer from PTSD; [OPSEU continues to fight for all workers](#) to be covered by the new legislation.

Home care restructuring

Following the introduction of a government discussion paper in late 2015, [OPSEU weighed in](#) on what is really wrong with the province's home care system: privatization and underfunding. The union continued to comment on the province's plans throughout the year, concluding with a [submission](#) to the committee studying Bill 41, the *Patients First Act*, in November.

Privatization

The fight against the Liberal government's privatization of public services and assets continued on from 2015 and never stopped in 2016. Some major signposts in the fight were as follows:

Anti-privatization legislation

- [A private member's bill](#) put forward by Catherine Fife, MPP, with research from OPSEU, passed Second Reading in the legislature in early March. The purpose of the bill was to require public entities who want to privatize services to pass a rigorous accountability and transparency test before doing so. While private member's bills seldom become law, Fife's Bill 167 made a substantial debate happen in the legislature on a very sensitive topic at a time when the government was taking public criticism for the

privatization of Hydro One as well as its use of price-gouging public-private partnerships to build public infrastructure.

LCBO privatization

- The OPSEU campaign against the provincial government's plan to slowly privatize the LCBO by allowing the sale of beer and wine in grocery stores picked up where it left off in 2015 and continued throughout 2016. Its message was simple: [privatization is a bad idea](#). [By the end of the year](#), the union had held 10 protests in front of LCBO stores to speak out against privatization.

Hydro One privatization

- There was no time in 2016 when OPSEU was not working hard on the campaign to stop the privatization of Hydro One, the province's electricity distribution system. At one of many events, OPSEU President Thomas calls the selloff plan "[legalized larceny](#)." The ongoing opposition to Hydro One privatization remains a major reason for the unpopularity of the Liberal government of Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne.

March 18 – Civil Enforcement Officers

- In a March [submission](#) to a consultation process run by the Ministry of the Attorney General, OPSEU called on the government to shelve plans to privatize the work of Civil Enforcement Officers, also known as Sheriffs.

April 11 – Waste-Free Ontario Act

- In an [analysis of Bill 151](#), the *Waste-Free Ontario Act*, OPSEU spoke out loudly against the plan to allow the privatization of some environmental inspection work.

Going global

- In July, [OPSEU President Thomas visited the Health Services Union in New South Wales, Australia](#) to work on building a global movement against privatization.

The "We Own It" campaign

- As part of the union's [ongoing opposition to privatization](#), and following on a major resolution passed by the 2016 OPSEU Convention, [activists from every OPSEU region came to Toronto](#) in September for intensive campaign training. Development of the "We Own It" campaign continued throughout 2016, leading to the launch of the We Own It website at www.weownit.ca. In November, some 15,000 OPSEU members joined President Thomas on two "telephone town hall" meetings. Members on the call strongly agreed that [fighting privatization must be a top priority](#) for the union. The campaign will kick into high gear early in 2017.

Child protection reform

Following the release of the 2015 Auditor General's report, which found systemic problems with the way children's aid works in Ontario, the province had vowed to overhaul children's aid, with Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne saying that change might require "blowing up the system." In a [position paper](#) released in March, OPSEU put forward a better idea: provide proper funding to meet the actual needs.

Gender wage gap

In March, [OPSEU members rallied](#) in Toronto outside an event where Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne was speaking for International Women's Day. The rally complemented a major spring [advertising campaign](#) by OPSEU that called on the Premier to "Mind the Wage Gap" and built on OPSEU's [submission](#) to the province's Gender Wage Gap Strategy Steering Committee earlier in the year. A key message in the campaign was that if the Premier is truly concerned about the gender wage gap, she should stop cutting wages in the public sector, which is the most female-dominated sector of the economy. It's a point OPSEU President Warren (Smokey) Thomas made in the [Toronto Sun](#) and elsewhere.

Cleaning up Ontario politics

As part of a campaign to end the corrupting influence of money in Ontario politics, OPSEU President Thomas called, in April, for the creation of [a commission](#) in Ontario to investigate the connection between political fundraising and the awarding of government contracts. As part of the campaign, Thomas also made remarks to legislative committees looking into changes to the [Municipal Elections Act](#) and the provincial [Election Finances Act](#). "[Democracy shouldn't come with a cover charge](#)," the union told MPPs.

Workplace sexual harassment

OPSEU continued its work in the fight against workplace sexual harassment with the launch, at Convention, of [three new educational videos](#) designed to empower OPSEU staff, members, and the general public to speak up when they experience, or witness, sexual harassment.

Education workers

OPSEU and other unions won a landmark legal victory when the Superior Court of Justice ruled that the Ontario government had violated the Canadian Charter of Right and Freedoms when Bill 115 imposed collective agreements on school board workers across the province. The case, known as [OPSEU v. Ontario](#), further cemented collective bargaining as a Charter-protected right.

Fort McMurray fire

OPSEU donated \$50,000 to the Canadian Red Cross to help victims of the forest fires raging in northern Alberta. OPSEU President Thomas travelled to Sudbury to give Ontario forest firefighters a [proper sendoff](#) as they headed west.

ServiceOntario

In May, [OPSEU launched a fightback](#) against the planned closure of nine publicly run ServiceOntario outlets around the province. The campaign received strong public support, and in June [the government announced it would review the decision](#). Unfortunately, the problem

did not go away for good. At the end of the year, OPSEU members and communities in northern Ontario are still [fighting hard to maintain hours and services](#) at small-town ServiceOntario branches.

Canadian Association of Labour Media awards

At its annual meeting in May, the Canadian Association of Labour Media named the OPSEU website at www.opseu.org as the [best labour website in Canada](#), both for design and content. OPSEU locals snagged six awards for communications performed by volunteers.

Hospital professionals bargaining

In late May, for the first time in a decade, the bargaining team for the Hospital Professionals Division (HPD) of OPSEU signed a [tentative collective agreement](#) with the Ontario Hospital Association without having to go to arbitration. Ratified in June, [the deal](#) provided HPD members with vacation improvements plus better shift and weekend premiums.

Autism services

In June, [President Thomas joined the fight](#) for provincial funding for Intensive Behavioural Intervention for children with autism aged five and over. [The Wynne government soon backtracked](#) on its planned cuts to the service.

Municipal Property Assessment Corporation

After a hard-fought bargaining campaign, OPSEU members at the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation signed a [new three-year contract](#) on June 17.

College funding

As part of a provincial consultation on the funding model for Ontario's public community colleges, OPSEU's College [Support](#) and [Academic](#) Divisions made a strong case for more funding. Ontario lags behind all other provinces in Canada in college funding.

Part-time college support staff vote

At the end of June, after a nine-month organizing campaign, [thousands of part-time college support staff finally got to vote](#) on whether to be represented by OPSEU. It was the culmination of the largest organizing drive in Canadian history. Andrew Cash, co-founder of the Urban Worker Project, called it "a major turning point in the battle against precarious work," but college presidents threw up roadblocks at the Ontario Labour Relations Board (OLRB) to attempt to stop the votes from being counted. OPSEU responded with [hard-hitting newspaper ads](#) and continues legal action at the OLRB.

Violence in mental health care

Following a number of [violent attacks](#) on staff at the Waypoint Centre for Mental Health Care in Penetanguishene, OPSEU launched a five-week campaign of advertising and advocacy in the summer to demand safer working conditions in mental health care. The “Stay Safe, Be Safe” campaign received major media attention in the region and helped raise the profile of safety issues in mental health facilities across the province. One consequence of the OPSEU activism was a [visit from Ontario Auditor General Bonnie Lysyk](#). The campaign at Waypoint was just one thread of a larger [year-long campaign](#) against violence in mental health care right across the province. The Mental Health Division held a major health and safety conference in October, and has [continued its advocacy](#) since.

Provincial and demonstration schools

In a perfect example of OPSEU working closely with service users to change government policy, the campaign to save provincial and demonstration schools ended in August with an announcement by the government that [the schools will stay open](#). OPSEU had begun campaigning shortly after a February announcement that the operation of the schools was being reviewed.

Provincial Young Workers Committee

The [ninth annual conference](#) of the OPSEU Provincial Young Workers Committee, held in August, highlighted the issues of “the Precarious Generation” and talked about actions to fight back.

“McEducation”

In August, [OPSEU slammed a Colleges Ontario plan](#) to allow training at the McDonald’s restaurant company to be considered equivalent to a year of study at a public community college. “Do we really want our future business leaders taking Ethics 101 from the Hamburglar?” President Thomas asked.

Cannabis retailing

In a poll commissioned by OPSEU in August, the Nanos research company found that the [LCBO is Ontarians’ number one choice](#) for where to sell cannabis if and when the federal government legalizes it. The LCBO has the most experience selling a controlled substance and is therefore the safest option, poll respondents said. OPSEU [spoke out](#) on the issue throughout the year.

OPSEU Human Rights Conference

OPSEU’s 15th annual Joint Leadership Day in September brought together members of all equity committees and caucuses with Executive Board Members and sector leaders to learn more and make plans about how to advance the cause of [“equity in a precarious world.”](#)

OPSEU Indigenous Conference

At the end of September, sponsored by the Indigenous Circle, OPSEU's first-ever Indigenous Conference was a [groundbreaking partnership](#) with Indigenous communities that came up with concrete ideas for how OPSEU could advance the cause of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. A month later, [President Thomas met with the Chiefs of Ontario](#) to discuss how OPSEU's new Indigenous Mobilizing Team could partner with First Nations communities. [Earlier in the year, OPSEU had also donated \\$70,000](#) to the Northern Food Justice initiative to help get nutritious, affordable food to remote Indigenous communities.

Changing Workplaces Review

As part of its ongoing participation in the Ministry of Labour's consultation on possible changes to the *Ontario Labour Relations Act* and the *Employment Standards Act* (ESA), OPSEU submitted its final submission to the Changing Workplaces Review in early October. Among other recommendations, [the union called on the government](#) to make "equal pay for equal work" a part of the ESA. The union continued to fight for better jobs for [people with precarious work](#).

Liquor Board Employees Division human rights victory

After more than three years of discussions, the Liquor Board Employees Division [signed an historic agreement](#) on November 1 to bring "equal pay for equal work" to more than 4,000 casual employees working in stores and depots of the Liquor Control Board of Ontario. Under the agreement, details of which are to be negotiated in early 2017, casual Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) are to be placed on the same pay grid as full-time permanent CSRs. This will boost their top pay rate by more than \$6 an hour at current rates.

Post-retirement benefits for OPSEU Pension Trust members

In November, more than two-and-a-half years after the Ontario government announced a plan to make retired OPTrust members pay half the cost of their benefit premiums upon retirement, OPSEU turned a long-running campaign into bargaining leverage and signed an [agreement](#) that maintained a [no-cost option](#) for all members.

Community Services Divisional Council conference

A two-day November conference including delegates from all five OPSEU sectors working in social services was a smashing success as members came together to raise the profile of their work in Ontario. The conference video, "[Telling our Stories](#)," brought tears to the eyes of many delegates.

Rural school closures

In late November, [OPSEU joined the fight](#) to save schools from closing in rural and northern communities. [The campaign paid off quickly](#) for Sudbury residents.

Occupational health and safety

As December began, OPSEU Region 1 Regional Vice-President [Len Elliott sharply criticized the Liberals](#) on a legislative committee that was looking into Bill 70. The new law will reduce proactive workplace inspections by Ministry of Labour inspectors and makes Ontario workplaces more dangerous.

2017 Ontario budget: child and youth services

In the first of several presentations leading up to the 2017 Ontario budget, OPSEU called on the government to make [more funding for child and youth services](#) a high priority. The presentation built on [OPSEU's detailed response to the report of the Residential Services Review Panel](#), which examined the province's child and youth residential services system.

Labour relations: OPSEU staff

It was a challenging year in the relationship between OPSEU and the Ontario Public Service Staff Union (OPSSU), which represents some 350 frontline union staff working at OPSEU's head office in Toronto and in regional offices around Ontario. However, labour peace within OPSEU was achieved [through](#) negotiation in the second half of the year. The parties ratified a new staff collective agreement in August and settled dozens of grievances in December. The staff union withdrew an Unfair Labour Practice complaint. In a year-end statement, both parties committed to “a work environment where staff are safe, valued and respected in their work to protect, promote and advance the best interests of OPSEU members and the trade union principles we all share.”



*Ontario Public Service Employees Union
100 Lesmill Road, Toronto, Ontario M3B 3P8
www.opseu.org*