

'WE NEED MORE HELP'

PROPOSED WAGE INCREASE NOT ENOUGH, SAYS EDUCATION SUPPORT WORKER

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Halton education support worker Danielle Blankstein says the province's proposed wage increase isn't enough to make ends meet.

Blankstein, who's worked for the Halton Catholic District School Board (HCDSB) for over a decade, said, "I'm appreciative of my job. But we need more help and support from the government."

The province proposed a two-per-cent yearly wage increase for education support staff — in Halton Hills, and across Ontario — making less than \$40,000 a year, and a 1.25 per cent raise to those making more in a four-year deal tabled Aug. 15.

An education support worker is anyone employed by a school board besides teachers and management, which covers a wide range of positions.

Over 1,700 OSBCU-CUPE members in Halton alone are impacted by the ongoing

contract negotiations.

The average school board support worker earns \$39,000 annually, with the proposal offering an increase of 33 cents to 53 cents per hour, according to a CUPE news release.

The previous contract introduced in 2019 — subject to legislation known as Bill 124 — offered an increase of 1 per cent a year for three years for public sector workers. All education union contracts expire at the end of August.

While inflation from 2012 to 2021 has totalled 19.5 per cent, there has only been an 8.8 per cent increase in wage settlements over the decade, said Laura Walton, president of (OSBCU) for the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

Added Walton, "We've already taken a 10.7 per cent wage cut and we will not take a wage cut again."

For Blankstein — a 32-year-old financial clerk at the HCDSB's Burlington office who earns approximately \$50,000 a year — an increase of 1.25 per cent would amount to a little over \$600 annually. That's a little less than a tank of gas per month.

Pointing to restricted workers' wages over the past decade and how inflation is expected to keep rising, OSBCU, which repre-



Graham Paine/Metroland

Danielle Blankstein says the proposed wage increase for education support workers is insufficient.

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- Danielle Blankstein

sents 55,000 CUPE education workers, is seeking an annual wage increases of 11.7 per cent — or \$3.25 per

hour.

At Queen's Park, Ontario Education Minister Stephen Lecce said the union is

seeking the equivalent of a 52 per cent raise, "which is the equivalent of the entire ministry of colleges and universities budget — it is the entire budget of the province of Saskatchewan. This is a massive increase."

Blankstein, a single mother for the past six years who's now expecting her second child with her fiancé, said, "Housing should cost 30 per cent of your income. Where on a wage scale that I'm making, could I even find a one-bedroom apartment for 30 per cent of my wage?" She added, "I've gone to college and I'm going to university to get a higher-paying job. But these higher paying jobs aren't paying enough."

OSBCU is calling for a strike vote as a 'demonstration of workers' resolve to achieve "reasonable, necessary, and affordable proposals for improving working and learning conditions in Ontario schools," states the CUPE website.

Lecce recently told the Toronto Star that families have "all borne a massive consequence of this pandemic, and the one obligation we have is to stay at the table and work together to get a deal." He added he was surprised at the move, given all sides have reported that talks to date "are actually quite fruitful ... and yet they're now on a potential path to strike in early September, when we know children should be in school."

Lecce asked union leaders to "rescind this action" immediately.

Blankstein said she has always worked two jobs to support her family. She is currently looking into additional employment in case the union implements a strike.

"I don't want a strike, but I can't afford not to," she said.

While working in the clerical department has allowed Blankstein some advancements in her career, she said government wage increases are often the only increment employees rely on.

Adopting OSBCU's proposal will help solve the school board's problem of recruiting and retaining employees, as well as increasing services and funding for children and their education, said Watson.

Strike votes for OSBCU members across Ontario are ongoing from Sept. 23 to Oct. 2.

- with files from the Toronto Star

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: With contract negotiations ongoing between the provincial government and the Ontario School Boards Council of Unions over education workers' wages, we wanted to gauge local reaction to the proposed increase.

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