

CONVENTION AT A GLANCE



**Smokey Thomas
delivers heartfelt
goodbye in final
presidential address**



Smokey Thomas delivers heartfelt goodbye in final presidential address

By Craig Hadley



After 15 years at the OPSEU/SEFPO helm, President Warren (Smokey) Thomas delivered his final address to over 2,000 attendees. At times, Thomas had to gather himself, as emotion overwhelmed him. His gratitude and appreciation was forefront as he reflected on the union's success over those years.

Under his leadership, OPSEU/SEFPO's membership more than doubled to over 180,000.

The President graciously thanked members, staff and labour allies for helping turn OPSEU/SEFPO into Ontario's best public sector union and proudly expressed his confidence that it will continue to grow.

With the list of Thomas's accomplishments simply too long to list, his fondest memory was OPSEU/SEFPO's "We Own it" campaign. It raised awareness of the value of public service and directly staved off the privatization of numerous

workplaces across Ontario. As successful as the campaign was, he was quick to point out that fighting privatization is an ongoing battle which will likely intensify as governments wrestle with mounting debts accrued during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It's a bittersweet day, as OPSEU/SEFPO's longest serving president passes the torch to a new leader while leaving behind a legacy of labour advocacy second to none.

Elder Ethel LaValley acknowledges OPSEU/SEFPO's effort towards Truth and Reconciliation

By Marilyn Ott

One of OPSEU/SEFPO's most respected voices is calling on the union's members to give serious thought about how they can partner with Indigenous communities.

"The work that you do within the Labour movement can make substantial and effective change, if you take appropriate action." Ethel LaValley told Convention Wednesday. "Move beyond tokenistic gestures and form relationships with us. Listen to Indigenous peoples and be comfortable in allowing us to take the lead."

LaValley, now retired, is a member of the Algonquins Pikwàkanagàn, and an Elder. A strong leader within the union movement, she has held the position of OPSEU/SEFPO Region 3 Executive Board Member/Vice President and Highest-Ranking Female Officer, Secretary Treasurer at the Ontario Federation of Labour and the first elected Canadian Labour of Congress Aboriginal Vice-President.

LaValley also served as the Highest-Ranking female on the NUPGE Executive Board. She was an activist within her community, elected to Council and

became Mayor of the Township of South Algonquin. She continues to be engaged as an Elder at traditional openings and gatherings for various forums.

LaValley spoke on the acknowledgment of the traditional territories and recognizing Indigenous people as traditional stewards of the land, an important part of showing respect to

First Nations people. She also discussed the act of smudging prior to the commencement of Convention and how the Convention floor and microphones were smudged to start the opening day in harmony.

LaValley said the discovery of the remains of hundreds of Indigenous children on residential school grounds over the past couple of years was shocking and disturbing. She acknowledged the Papal apology that was received a few days ago and suggested that although this was a welcome response towards Truth and Reconciliation, there is still much work to be done.

Her remarks at the opening of Convention recognized OPSEU/SEFPO's contribution towards Truth and Reconciliation. She thanked the membership and the leadership for the work that they have done and will continue to do in the future.



New delegates to Convention learn the ropes

By Marilyn Ott

Every Convention sees a crop of new delegates. Given how complex the rules of order can be and how overwhelming Convention can seem, OPSEU/SEFPO has ensured that newcomers are given the tools to navigate it for their benefit and the benefit of all those they represent.

On Tuesday evening – the day before Convention opens – a seminar for new delegates was held. As one would expect, out-going President Warren (Smokey) Thomas was on hand to greet them with words of welcome and encouragement. He stressed that Convention is more than just a meeting; it is OPSEU/SEFPO's highest-ranking authority. Attendance and participation are crucial to the democratic process of our member-driven union.

He pointed out that there will be many discussions, while decisions will be made that will mobilize actions towards bringing us all to tomorrow, together.

There were two handouts for new delegates, both on aspects of Roberts Rules of Order, which deal with how to amend and vote on motions presented on the Convention floor.

There was also a full review of the Resolutions Committee. Committee members' job is to review, categorize, consolidate and rank all resolutions submitted for presentation to delegates. Resolutions are motions or proposals on a policy or a course of action that will guide the union in the coming months or years.

These form the basis of procedural rules and action guidelines for the union. Submissions are accepted from locals, ministry or sector divisional meetings, area councils, the Executive Board, the provincial committees and the executive of the retired members division. Resolutions require approval by a majority of the voting delegates at the meetings where they are crafted.

If you wish to comment on a resolution, you are free to speak, first stating your name, local and if you are new. It was also underscored that if you don't understand something, just ask the people at your table! They're more than likely they will be able to help you.



Eddy takes questions on the budget

By Dan McKnight



On Tuesday evening, OPSEU/SEFPO First Vice-President/Treasurer Eduardo (Eddy) Almeida, gave a presentation on OPSEU/SEFPO's proposed budget for 2022. It was an informal presentation to allow members to ask questions prior to the official start of Convention. About 50 members attended.

OPSEU/SEFPO's projected revenue and expenses are listed in Convention document "D". Eddy said the union's dues revenue are expected to increase to \$127 million. However, this good news needs to be balanced by the fact that OPSEU/SEFPO should get ready to fight against austerity that future governments are likely to impose due to their high deficits and debts.

Due to the pandemic, expenses on events like Convention 2020 and 2021 were drastically reduced. This has allowed the union to reinvest these funds into added services for members. For example, OPSEU/SEFPO was able to pay off debt associated with the purchase of an office building to be used by members. As an added benefit, these buildings are considered as assets in the strike fund. If more funds are needed, these buildings can be used as collateral.

A property OPSEU/SEFPO recently acquired is the Dorset Training Centre. It includes 21 buildings. The union will renovate this beautiful waterfront property and use it as a training and conference centre and will also be an asset in the strike fund.

Budget Q & A presentations are a great way for members to learn more about OPSEU/SEFPO budget.



OPSEU/ SEFPO's wellness room: a place to decompress

By Dan McKnight

Are you feeling anxious, stressed or overwhelmed by events at Convention? Is this your first large event since the COVID pandemic started? Do you need a place to get away and relax?

This year, OPSEU/SEFPO has made available a wellness room, where members at Convention can take a break and recover from the anxiety and stress they may experience. It's an innovative idea from the union designed to help include more members – especially now, we try to return to large, in-person events again. The wellness room has a lounge and a more private area to lie down. There are two trained counsellors to help you deal with issues that may arise at Convention.

The wellness room is located at Room 203C. It is open from 8.30 a.m. to 6 p.m. from Wed. to Friday, and from 9 a.m. to 12 noon on Saturday. If you need to decompress, OPSEU/SEFPO's wellness room is a place for you!



The Many challenges equity faces in a union

By Michael
Hamilton

The notion of equity within OPSEU/SEFPO has been a hot topic issue the last few years. The various equity committees have been lobbying OPSEU/SEFPO in terms of there being more diversity and inclusion within the leadership of OPSEU/SEFPO.

This year, the idea of introducing equity seats was supposed to be brought to the Convention floor so the membership could vote on it. However, due to the motion not being brought forward originally to the OPSEU/SEFPO Constitution Committee, OPSEU/SEFPO's legal team couldn't review the language so it could be aligned with the Corporations Act. As a result, the motion, unfortunately, had to be postponed to next year's Convention.

The level of disappointment was apparent in some of the speakers such as Peter Thompson, head of the Coalition of Racialized Workers, and Sara LaBelle, one of the OPSEU/SEFPO Region 3 Board Members. There is still hope for the motion, and this delay provides the equity committees an additional year to make sure that all of the language is in place so the members will be able to vote on it at the next Convention.

For members like Peter Thompson, this has been a dream that he wants to see come to fruition. There is a level of positivity that ultimately the membership will agree to adopt this motion and the additional equity seats will be added to the board.



Kola Iluyomade, the social justice giant

By Michael Hamilton
and the Equity Unit

The Fred Upshaw Social Justice Award was presented for the first time at this year's Convention. It was created by the Coalition of Racialized Workers (CoRW) to honour former OPSEU/SEFPO President, Fred Upshaw. He was a trailblazer and champion of human rights in the labour movement. Upshaw was the first Black President to lead a major Canadian union and he put the equity on the map for Ontario. This award was created to recognize leadership and excellence of racialized members, who have contributed to their union and their communities.



When the time came to decide on the inaugural award recipient, the decision was unanimous. It would have to be someone who was larger than life. Someone who embodied the values, principles and legacy of Upshaw. This is what Kola Iluyomade stood for and fought for until his last days. For those of us who knew him, he wasn't fierce. He was the fiercest. A brother, a leader, a visionary and a fellow friend in the trenches.

Kola joined OPSEU/SEFPO in 2017 and was a member of Local 5117. In his capacity as the Vice-Chair for People of African Descent on the Coalition of Racialized Workers and as Chair of CoRW in Region 5, Kola spearheaded OPSEU/SEFPO's inaugural Racialized Workers Conference in 2018. His words, work and relentless dedication, started the journey we as a union have embarked on to dismantle anti-Black racism. Kola, knew that change wouldn't come easy but he also was never one to walk away from the truth or justice.

Kola spoke truth to power and his work didn't stop when he left the union. At a critical time when the education system destroyed Black students' future, he took on one of the largest fights against this institution. The work he did to address anti-Black racism in the education system is the pillar and foundation of the changes that are currently awakening school boards across the province and it started with the Peel District School Board.

One of the last things Kola did before he died was stand in solidarity with his former coworkers and union colleagues when Black Creek Community Health Centre went on strike. This demonstrated his long lasting commitment to ensuring fair working conditions and fair wages for workers everywhere. He wholeheartedly believed in the power and value of unions. This was a testament to who he was as an individual - always putting other people before himself.

On Wednesday afternoon, Kola's wife Funke and his son Ore accepted this award on his behalf. Funke addressed Convention floor and reminded us of the love and laughter Kola brought to many despite the circumstances or adversities he faced when challenging those in power. She also reminded us of all of the sacrifices that Kola made during his time as an OPSEU/SEFPO member. This is why the award from his union meant so much to his family.

Kola passed away on June 24, 2021 due to an sudden and unforeseen illness. His work and the ripple effects he has made at OPSEU/SEFPO will be felt for generations to come.

Rest in Power Brother.

Young workers keep on pushing forward

By Michael Hamilton

If there is anything that the pandemic has shown us, it is that young workers learned to mobilize and be stronger voices in their workplaces. Young workers have proved that positive worker engagement and support is possible. This year, OPSEU/SEFPO presented its first annual Young Workers Award to Kaylee Heath of Local 329.

Kaylee, a nurse by trade, worked tirelessly especially during the pandemic. During her speech, Kaylee thanked her local members and the members in Region 3 for always being a support system for her and co-workers. She also stated that the knowledge and tools that she has learned from past equity conferences really helped shape a foundation for her to be a leader and a strong voice for her fellow members. Kaylee thanked her fellow comrades on the Young Workers Committee for their tireless efforts and being a support system during the pandemic.

Despite a global pandemic and continued cuts to the health care system, Kaylee continually demonstrates drive and dedication to her role. She continues to advocate for racialized and marginalized members to have a more active role

within OPSEU/SEFPO, and has pushed her employer to provide a more equitable and safe work environment for her co-workers. The future is bright for Kaylee, and OPSEU/SEFPO is proud of the work that she has done and will continue to do.



Tisha Forster 'humbled' in receiving Leah Casselman Award

By Marilyn Ott

The Leah Casselman Award has been presented to Tisha Forster, president of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Elgin/Oxford Local 133, recently known for "mobilizing to win".

Under Tisha's leadership, her bargaining unit has achieved one of the best CMHA contracts in the entire province, making it the first CMHA to join our union family. In addition, Tisha assisted with organizing three more CMHAs to join OPSEU/SEFPO.

Tisha also:

- Chaired five rounds of bargaining while simultaneously leading related creative support campaigns
- Negotiated with her employer's lawyer to achieve all monetary demands in her unit's first contract. This included advocating for pay equity to close an identified pay gap

of more than \$5/hour, resulting in the first pay equity settlement in CMHA's history

- Led three strike votes toward contracts and fought against bullying and harassment in the workplace
- Mobilized campaign efforts to protect mental health and addictions services, both locally and regionally
- Found creative ways to protect members during the pandemic through her leadership as co-chair on the Joint Occupational Health and Safety Committee, specifically in areas related to limited refusals and accommodations for remote work.

"I'm very humbled by this award," Tisha said in accepting the honour. "I dedicate this award to Local 133 and to the Mental Health and Addictions Division. I would also like to thank everyone who mentored me in the union."



Health and Safety Award recognizes all OPSEU/SEFPO locals

By Dan McKnight

This year, OPSEU/SEFPO's Health and Safety Award was given to all OPSEU/SEFPO locals for keeping the province running during the COVID-19 pandemic.

OPSEU/SEFPO members continue to be the front-line heroes during these unprecedented times. Some members were faced with overcoming many challenges as they adjusted to working remotely, as required by their employers. Others were still required to be at work and faced new health risks and changing working conditions that reflected public health guidelines.

President Smokey Thomas noted it was a credit to OPSEU/SEFPO members that COVID stayed out of the jails and group homes as long as it did. Smokey said the response of OPSEU/SEFPO members to the pandemic was "one of our finest hours".

Since it would be impossible to single out any local for OPSEU/SEFPO's response to COVID, this year all OPSEU/SEFPO locals were appropriately awarded the Health and Safety Award.



CONGRÈS **2022** CONVENTION

TOWARDS TOMORROW **TOGETHER** POUR DEMAIN **ENSEMBLE**