organizing for success

**NATIONAL   
SECTOR COUNCIL**

CONFERENCE

**SOCIAL SERVICES**

This profile is intended to   
provide CUPE members with   
basic information about the sector they work in from a national perspective. Find all our sector profiles and more information online at cupe.ca

CUPE members in the social services sector provide a range of services and supports to vulnerable and often marginalized people. CUPE members working in the sector do a wide variety of work, such as assisting women and children fleeing domestic violence, working with adults with developmental disabilities, protecting   
children from harm and neglect, providing employment counselling, administering social assistance, staffing shelters and providing education about HIV and AIDS. They work for a range of employers from small non-profit community agencies to large social assistance programs and municipalities. CUPE works with the people we serve, their families and the organizations that support them, to improve services and increase funding.

Approximately 85 per cent of workers in the social services sector are women. An increasing amount of work is being pushed to temporary, contract, casual, or part-time positions. CUPE is the second-largest union in the social services sector, representing approximately 27 per cent of all unionized social services workers. The largest union in the sector is the National Union of Public and General Employees, representing about 34 per cent of unionized workers.

By the numbers:

• Number of members in the sector: 50,200

• Number of social services bargaining   
units: 524

In addition, we have members in larger   
locals that overlap with several other sectors   
including municipalities, school boards and health sectors. For example, workers in Ontario who provide social assistance are employed   
by municipalities.

Funding and governance

Members in CUPE’s social services   
sector are employed by non-profit social services agencies and local governments that provide social services and social assistance. Social services agencies are funded to varying degrees by one or   
several levels of government, corporate and private donations, the United Way,   
and/or their own fundraising activities. Some agencies, such as child welfare agencies in Ontario, are mandated services and fully funded by the provincial government. Other agencies cobble funding together from a variety of sources. Local governments that provide social services often enter into cost-sharing arrangements with   
provincial governments.

In recent years, many governments have reduced or frozen spending on social services, putting severe strain on the sector. Chronic underfunding has resulted in widespread restructuring, with agency mergers, program cuts, program offloading and closures, a casualization of the work force, increased workload and difficulties achieving gains at the bargaining table.

In addition to layoffs and facility   
closures, underfunding has led to the serious problem of overwork for remaining staff. A lack of backfilling for workers on leave and vacation, heavy caseloads and growing paperwork requirements for workers have resulted in high rates of stress and deteriorating health and safety conditions.

**Privatization**

More than a decade of government funding cuts have made social services vulnerable to privatization – either   
outright or by stealth.

An emerging form of privatization is   
the social impact bond (SIB), a market-  
driven investment approach that allows the private sector to profit from social service delivery. Under this model, the private sector finances an organization to provide social services. If agreed-upon targets are met, the government pays investors up to a 14 per cent return on their investment. In adopting this model, governments outsource control of financing, service delivery and follow-up evaluation to the private sector.

SIBs are being considered in British  
Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario, Nova   
Scotia, Quebec and New Brunswick in areas such as prisoner rehabilitation and youth apprehensions, asthma reduction, and services for Aboriginal peoples.   
Saskatchewan already has one SIB, a home for single mothers and their children, and is exploring additional projects. The federal government is also involved in a SIB to provide skills training to individuals. However, 60 per cent of the SIB funding is expected to be spent on overhead and profits rather than service delivery.

The introduction of individualized funding, or “vouchers,” for clients is another form of stealth privatization. Governments give financial resources directly to parents, families or individuals so they can purchase social services and supports. In Ontario, for example, indivi­duals with developmental disabilities or their families receive funding in order to purchase services and supports. Though framed as providing choice to families, this practice is in reality a piecemeal   
approach that weakens the overall   
system by fragmenting services, eroding   
working conditions and wages, and   
continuing the chronic underfunding   
in the sector. It does nothing to ensure   
that needed services are actually available and accessible, while promoting the development of private for-profit services.

For over a decade, public-private   
partnerships (P3s) have been making headway in the social services sector.   
Since 2002, the BC government has maintained a P3 with an Arizona for-profit corporation for the delivery   
of employment services to persons receiving social assistance. A similar service, JobsNow, was introduced as a pilot project from 2005-2007 by the Ontario government. An independent review found that it was no more effective than the public program and failed to save the government money. The pilot project in Ontario was cancelled following the assessment, however the BC program continues.

Another model being promoted is competitive bidding, which opens the door to privatization by imposing a market model on community social services agencies. For example, the former Conservative government in Alberta introduced funding for preventative social services programs through a competitive bidding process in which agency applications are reviewed and ranked based on guidelines and an assessment of community needs. This process pits non-profit community   
agencies against one another and against private operators for scarce funding resources, staff and volunteers.

**Bargaining**

CUPE’s social services sector has a   
mix of local, coordinated and central bargaining. Local bargaining is the sole form in New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Manitoba and Alberta, while some locals in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, Ontario and Saskatchewan have forms of coordinated bargaining. Central bargaining exists in BC, Quebec and Ontario.

In BC, Nova Scotia and Ontario, legisla­tive attacks on collective bargaining and interest arbitration have created challenges in the sector. Attacks on workers’ rights, such as legislated wage freezes, back-to-work legislation, forced arbitration and expansive definitions of essential services have created a difficult collective bargaining environment.

Members in some sub-sectors have made gains in negotiating collective agreement language on workload. For example, many locals in Ontario’s child welfare sector now have comprehensive language on workload, achieved through coordinated bargaining.

**PENSIONS**

Members in the social services sector have a variety of pension arrangements: municipal pension plans (BC community   
social service workers and Ontario municipal and Children’s Aid Societies workers), large pension plans (Healthcare of Ontario Pension Plan), the Multi-  
Sector Pension Plan (MSPP), and Group Registered Retirement Savings Plans. Over 75 per cent of social service locals have a pension plan; over half of those are defined benefit plans. CUPE has been extremely successful at introducing the MSPP in many smaller social services workplaces. For example, through coordinated bargaining, members in 86 per cent of developmental services bargaining units in Ontario now participate in the MSPP. Many workers in the social services sector, however, still do not have any pension arrangements.

**Success stories**

CUPE’s lobbying, strong connections with allies and on-the-ground mobilizing have led to significant gains for workers in the social services sector.

After four months of job actions and a strong strike vote, the community social services sector in BC signed a five-year contract in 2014 with wage adjustments and increases of up to 11.5 per cent. CUPE   
BC was active with the BC Community Living Action Group (BC-CLAG), a network  
of self-advocates, families, support staff and agencies that support adults with disabilities. Throughout the bargaining process BC-CLAG held public meetings, advocated, and did media work. At the same time, members engaged in rotating strikes throughout the province. Through this multi-pronged mobilization, workers were able to highlight the crisis in the community social services sector and achieve gains at the bargaining table.

The near-closure due to funding shortfalls of Bryony House, a transition home in Halifax, illustrates the degree of crisis in the sector. CUPE members worked with the Public Service Alliance of Canada, the Nova Scotia Federation of Labour and the Transition Home Association of Nova Scotia to highlight the impact of a lack of stable funding. In addition to facility closures and bare-minimum or short staffing, workers were being asked to fundraise to supplement budgets for food and fuel, and to pick up extras for clients at their own expense. The collective labour campaign resulted in an additional $500,000 put toward the budget of Nova Scotia’s Transition Homes.

Developmental services workers mobilized for much-needed wage increases in Manitoba and Ontario. In 2014, the Ontario government allocated $200 million over three years for frontline developmental services workers, while the Manitoba government announced $6 million over three years for support workers.

These increases would not have   
happened without ongoing and concerted pressure from CUPE members. In Manitoba, members held information pickets and demonstrated outside the minister of family services and housing’s office. The funding announcement came one day before the strike deadline for members of CUPE 3085 in Selkirk.   
Ontario members pressured the   
government by inviting their members   
of provincial parliament to their worksites, making presentations to   
parliamentary committees and taking part in coordinated bargaining.

**Social services workers by   
gender**

**WOMEN**

**MEN**

**Social services workers in CUPE**

**SOCIAL SERVICES**

**ALL OF CUPE**

**2 Funding**

Spending freezes and cuts put severe strain on services.

**2 Privatization** Social services   
 threatened by schemes   
 to profit from service delivery.

**3 Bargaining**

Workers face   
 a difficult bargaining environment.

**3 Success stories** Members mobilize   
 to win real gains.

social services sector

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**Visit cupe.ca: Resources for members**• More information for your sector • Tools to help you and your local   
• Success stories from across the country • And more!

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