

WORKPLACE TRENDS **EDUCATION**

New report details clerical working conditions in BC's public school system

A new report looking at the performance of clerical work in BC's public school system explores how CUPE members have fared in the wake of a decade of government austerity and service cuts.

Under Duress: the intensification of clerical work in BC's public school system is based on an online survey of clerical workers undertaken in the spring of 2014, along with a review of relevant research, and analysis of school budgeting. About 1,300 clerical staff in 49 BC school districts completed this survey for a response rate of close to 30 per cent. The report was written by CUPE research representative John Malcolmson.

Who occupies today's K-12 clerical jobs?

The report confirms that clerical work remains overwhelmingly female-dominated as 98 per cent of survey participants indicate they are women. The average age of today's K-12 clerical worker is 51 years and

that worker has 22 years of clerical work experience, roughly half of which is with her current employer.

The largest group of clerical workers holds college-level credentials, with a smaller number reporting university degrees. Most clerical work in the public school system is both continuing and full-time in nature. The average K-12 clerical worker earns almost \$36,000 annually.

What did we learn about K-12 clerical work?

Under Duress shows that, like other school support workers, clerical staff face relentless budgetary pressure on school operations. Combined with a push to direct maximum resources to the classroom, there have been ongoing efforts to squeeze more out of school system support workers with less funding.

The result has been a compression of clerical work hours and increased workload. Other effects include increases in job requirements,



The intensification of clerical work in B.C. schools

CUPE

Report by John Malcolmson, CUPE Research, B.C. Region
December 2014

additional range and complexity of things demanded of workers, and rising stress associated with these demands.

Despite these changes, clerical staff report high levels of overall job satisfaction, citing the importance of the personal relationships they cultivate to how they feel about work.

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The report does uncover health and safety concerns. Most clerical staff report pain – concentrated in the neck, back and shoulder areas – and most see it as work-related. The survey

also compiles information on ergonomic issues raised by members, chief among them the fact that many clerical staff work long hours seated in front of computer screens. This raises concerns regarding the

long-term health of clerical staff faced with these job requirements.

Unpaid time is also an issue for clerical staff. On average, a clerical worker performs half an hour of unpaid work each week. As *Under Duress* notes, the performance of unpaid work provides clear evidence of the commitment members have to their jobs amidst conditions marked

CAMPAIGNS PUBLIC SAFETY

CUPE defends public safety, opposes reducing flight attendant numbers

More than a decade after WestJet first applied to Transport Canada to reduce the ratio of flight attendants to passengers, Canada's airline industry has finally succeeded in gaining exemptions from regulations governing the ratio of flight attendants to passengers.

This year, every major airline in Canada will legally be allowed to reduce the number of flight attendants from one for every 40 passengers to one for every 50 passenger seats on most narrow-bodied aircraft. The new ratio will lead to the elimination of at least one flight attendant on many planes. CUPE flight attendants who are now flying with the new ratio report increased workloads, greater fatigue, and declining safety and service standards.

Transport Minister Lisa Raitt justified the change by claiming the 1:50 ratio conforms to the "international standard." However, not even Transport Canada can assure the public that an "equivalent" level of safety will be maintained with the new ratio, saying only that it deems the new ratio to be "acceptable."

For more than ten years, CUPE has provided comprehensive research to regulators and parliamentarians which proves that reducing the number of flight attendants jeopardizes the safety of both cabin crew and passengers. We have argued that successful evacuations, for example the 2005 Air France crash in Toronto and the 2013 Asiana crash in San Francisco, were directly attributable to the adequacy of staffing on board.

We have also emphasized that while evacuations are rare, flight attendants perform countless tasks that guarantee passenger safety from take-off to landing. In addition to normal operating procedures, flight attendants routinely deal with medical emergencies, unruly passengers, mechanical failures, and a host of other potential threats to safety.

CUPE has responded with a comprehensive campaign to maintain the 1:40 ratio. The union has also asked the courts to review Transport Canada's decision.

Find out more about the 1:40 campaign at cupe.ca

■ Janet Dassinger

Tabletalk is published four times a year to provide CUPE bargaining committees and servicing representatives useful information for preparing and negotiating bargaining demands.

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by declining hours of work and increases in individual workload.

Clerical staff also reference a significant incidence of aggressive encounters with parents, community members and students. The way they deal with them differs depending on the circumstances. Encounters with students are more likely to elicit formal reporting, and follow-up

consequences as students are generally covered by codes of conduct. Parents and community members are not as clearly covered so there is increased likelihood of members brushing off these kinds of encounters.

What's next?

The report calls for workers, CUPE and public school employers to work

together to address key issues and concerns raised and to improve the work environment faced by K-12 clerical staff.

Read the full report. Check out *Under Duress: the intensification of clerical work in BC's public school system* at cupe.bc.ca

■ John Malcolmson

RESEARCH SOCIAL SERVICES



New report details causes and potential solutions for overwork

More Canadians are struggling to keep pace with their work demands. The Canadian Mental Health Association reports that one in four Canadians work 50 or more hours per week, compared to one in 10 a decade ago. The fallout from overwork costs Canadian employers an estimated \$12 billion per year due to lost productivity, health claims and absenteeism. Disability claims from overwork can reach as high as 12 per cent of payroll costs.

CUPE has produced a report on overwork trends. Though the report

focuses on the social services sector, workers from other sectors may find much of the information applies to them as well.

Overwork may be defined as too many duties or responsibilities for one worker, with too few hours in the day to complete all required tasks. It can take many different forms, including working long hours, unreasonable work demands, pressure to work overtime (paid or unpaid), fewer breaks, fewer days off, fewer holidays,

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Overwork collective agreement checklist for social services

This is a partial list. For the full list, check out the report at cupe.ca

1. Does management acknowledge that it is responsible for dealing with workload concerns in a proactive fashion?
2. Are there regular employee workload reviews and opportunities to ask for assessments?
3. Is there an established caseload or workload range?
4. Has a joint union-management workload committee been established?
5. Does the employer have to notify the union of a caseload or workload review, including subsequent follow-up and results?
6. Is there protected time for case documentation and paperwork?
7. Are vacations and other leaves properly staffed and scheduled?
8. Can workload be subject to grievance?
9. Is the employer required to fill all vacancies as soon as possible?
10. Are there provisions regarding work-life balance?

Quebec imposes restructuring on municipal pension plans

Quebec municipalities and unions have 12 months starting February 1 to negotiate an agreement to restructure all defined benefit pension plans in the municipal and urban transit sectors. The negotiations were mandated as part of *An Act to foster the financial health and sustainability of municipal defined benefit pension plans* (Bill 3) passed last December by the Quebec National Assembly.

The negotiation period can be extended by six months (two three-month periods) if necessary. The parties can use conciliation if they wish. However, if this process does not produce an agreement, arbitration is mandatory.

Prior to negotiations, pension committees also had obligations to fulfill. They were required to perform an actuarial valuation up to December 31, 2013 and submit it to the Régie des rentes du Québec (the province's pension regulatory authority) no later

than December 31, 2014. Failure to do so would result in penalties. This valuation defines the share of the deficit attributable to retirees and active workers.

Effects on active workers and retirees

The restructuring of the various plans will take effect retroactively to January 1, 2014. There will be many adverse effects on workers and retirees.

The deficit attributable to active members for years of service prior to January 1, 2014 must be shared by the employer and active members equally. Active members must pay their share by reducing their benefits or increasing their contribution (by no more than three per cent). If a new deficit for the years of service previous to January 1, 2014 were to appear during a subsequent actuarial valuation, the employer would assume full responsibility.

Bill 3 also calls for the elimination of all automatic indexing clauses as a first measure to scale back entitlements. The normal pension is protected and cannot be reduced, and the same applies to the accrual rate.

As for the deficit attributable to retired members on January 1, 2014, municipalities can decide to suspend indexation if they wish, effective January 1, 2017. The value of the indexation suspension cannot cover more than half of the retired members' share of the deficit. If a subsequent actuarial valuation were to uncover a surplus, the indexation must be restored and take priority over any other right.

Deficits attributable to years of service after December 31, 2013 must be shared equally by the employer and active members. Plans must also have a stabilization fund to which parties contribute equally. The current service cost contribution is capped at 18 per cent of payroll. This cap can be increased by 0.5 per cent if the majority of active members are women. If the average age is greater than 45, the cap is increased by 0.6 per cent for each full year of deviation between the average age of the group and 45.

■ **Sylvain Pilon**

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fast and pressured work pace, performance monitoring, unrealistic management expectations, additional or inappropriate tasks, and a lack of replacements for staff on leave.

Overwork erodes the quality of social services. Workers often feel frustrated because they're unable to perform their job as well as they

would like to. It can also jeopardize clients' health and safety.

The health effects of overwork range from mild symptoms like headaches and sleep disorders to the more serious health effects like burnout, depression, heart attacks or strokes. Workers who are stressed are more than three times more likely to suffer a major depression. Stressed workers are also more

likely to miss more time at work. Overwork also affects an employer's ability to attract and retain qualified staff and prevents workers from being active in their union.

Workload is a management responsibility. The best way to ensure that management takes workers' concerns about workload seriously is through the collective agreement.

Check out the full report on overwork in the social services sector at cupe.ca

■ **Joe Courtney**