

Library

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's 22,595 library workers provide frontline services to Canadians across the country. Approximately 12,495 of CUPE's library workers are in 119 stand-alone public library locals, while the rest belong to locals with members in municipalities, universities, colleges and school boards.

The primary job classifications are librarian, library clerk, library archive technician and page. Most library workers are women (85 per cent); racialized workers account for about 12 per cent of CUPE library members.

Many library workers are in part-time or casual positions. CUPE represents 80 per cent of all unionized library workers in Canada. The majority are in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia, and we have members in most other provinces.

LIBRARIES AS COMMUNITY HUBS

A library is often a central community hub. Meeting rooms are used by community groups, library staff host education programs and clubs, and the publicly accessible computer terminals are so popular that users line up. Canada's public libraries log 100 million visits and lend 2.1 million books every year. Nearly two-thirds of Canadians have a library card.

The public library is the only public institution that provides free access to the Internet through over 8,500 computers that are accessed over 18 million times a year. Libraries provide services for seniors, employment supports, language and reading groups, citizenship test preparation and help for newcomers to build their resumes.

After the 2008 recession, visits to libraries surged as people flocked there to search for jobs, upgrade their education and sometimes just find a safe place to be. In fact, over 200,000 Canadians visit their public library each month to get help looking for work.

FUNDING

Libraries are funded by all three levels of government – federal, provincial and municipal. Municipalities are the largest funders, spending more than the federal and provincial governments combined. The federal government provides funding exclusively to national libraries, while the provinces and territories fund public, school, university and college libraries.

Federal library funding has been inconsistent and dramatically reduced over the past several years. The federal government has significantly reduced the library workforce and closed several federal departmental libraries. These closures meant the end of interlibrary loans from those collections, threats to irreplaceable documentation and the loss of skilled researchers.

Provincial and municipal library budgets face serious threats. In 2016, the Newfoundland and Labrador government announced plans to close 54 libraries to save less than \$1 million. The closures would have seen almost 60 women in rural communities lose their jobs. CUPE 2329, the local representing the province's library workers, worked with CUPE Newfoundland and Labrador to successfully campaign to stop the closures and create the possibility that new libraries may be opened.



In 2017, CUPE organized the largest days of action in recent Saskatchewan history to respond to funding cuts announced in the provincial budget. CUPE mobilized up to 6,000 people in “read-ins” in over 70 communities under the banner, “Save SK Libraries”. Hundreds of CUPE members and other community members wrote letters, phoned and visited members of the legislature, got thousands of petitions signed, and made sure that every newspaper and call-in radio station was flooded with calls to keep the libraries open. Bowing to the pressure, the Saskatchewan government announced it would completely restore the \$4.8 million in funding cuts to the province’s libraries.

Toronto has also seen serious threats to its library funding. In 2011, the city tried to cut library funding by 10 per cent. Members of CUPE 4948 fought back with a campaign that reduced the scope of the cuts and even brought about a budget increase for 2014.

Issues

RISE OF PRECARIOUS WORK

The CUPE National Library Workers’ Survey on Precarious Employment found that a large percentage of library workers are precariously employed. Precarious work may be part-time, temporary, casual or contract work. It provides fewer full-time, permanent hours of work and fewer, if any, employment benefits like access to extended health insurance benefits or pension plans.

The survey results reveal that 52 per cent of public library workers and 54 per cent of library workers employed in municipal, school board and university libraries are either precariously employed or are vulnerable to precarious employment. Library workers who are precariously employed tend to work less than full-time hours, earn less than \$40,000 annually,

have more than one job, and work as library clerks, assistants, or pages.

Many part-time workers hold down several jobs to make ends meet. Split-shifts and lack of guaranteed hours make coordinating with other jobs and achieving work-life balance difficult. The lack of full-time work opportunities makes it challenging to attract young workers into the field. The rise of precarious work not only affects workers, but also has an impact on the quality and scope of library services.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Workplace health and safety is an ongoing concern. A CUPE BC survey of over 500 library workers found that library workers witness, and in many cases are responsible for dealing with, verbal threats, intoxicated patrons, drug use, theft and the viewing of explicit material. Over 65 per cent of respondents reported exposure to biohazards like feces, urine, used needles and bed bugs.

Public libraries are among the last public spaces that are safe and open to all. They are a safe haven for people who are homeless or battling addictions or mental health challenges. Library workers interact with marginalized and vulnerable populations daily and are often called upon to perform duties more commonly associated with social work – but with little or no training in skills such as conflict resolution. Sometimes situations escalate, and workers are subjected to physical or verbal violence and harassment. Library workers are especially at risk when working alone.

Library workers are at risk of back injuries and repetitive strain injuries from lifting heavy books, boxes and bags. Libraries are often housed in old or under-maintained buildings. Indoor air quality and ventilation issues are common, including mold, asbestos and off-gassing from decomposing film and microfilm.



STAFFLESS LIBRARIES

The staffless library model poses additional threats. It's already been introduced in parts of Europe, and now the cost-cutting measure has spread to Canadian cities, including Toronto, Hamilton and Calgary. A staffless library is just that – a library with no on-site staff during extended hours. Staffless libraries are monitored by video surveillance, which raises the alarm about public safety – slashed security budgets and staffing levels have led to an increase in violent incidents in Toronto's public libraries.

PRIVATIZATION AND RESTRUCTURING

Privatization affects libraries in various ways. A common threat is contracting out of bibliographical services such as ordering, processing, cataloguing material and technology.

The move to self-service checkout and book returns is also common, leading to fewer staff positions and a decrease in the valued frontline service culture. Further hurting quality frontline service, private contractors tend to cut corners, lay off or hire fewer staff, and try to cut wages and benefits.

Public-private partnerships (P3s) are a recent threat. The City of Ottawa considered a P3 for the development of the Ottawa Public Library's new main branch. CUPE 503, which represents library workers at the Ottawa Public Library, campaigned with activists and community groups to publicly oppose any P3 development.

The City eventually abandoned the P3 proposal in favour of a plan to house the new public library and Library and Archives Canada in a new development close to the city centre. The "super library" as it's known is scheduled to open to the public in 2024.

SERVICES FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Public library services are poor or completely lacking in small, rural, and remote Indigenous communities. Many communities have no access to properly funded public libraries, especially those on reserves or in remote regions. There's a lack of materials produced and published in Indigenous languages which contributes to an overall lack of resources. Advocacy groups have called on governments to provide more funding.

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE

Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) is an electronic chip that replaces traditional barcodes. It is used to identify and track books, DVDs, CDs and other library materials. RFID is a threat to library workers' job security because it allows patrons to check materials in and out of the library without staff assistance.

Initially praised as a tool to help staff, RFID is increasingly used by management to cut positions. RFID technology is in use in libraries across Canada including the North Vancouver District Public Library, Ottawa Public Library and the Halifax Public Library.

Bargaining

Most library locals bargain directly with their employer. In some areas, lead local or limited coordinated bargaining is part of an overall bargaining strategy. Negotiated annual wage increases continue to be small in the library sector, at two per cent or less.

Precarious employment in the library sector is a major challenge for union bargaining teams. Local 4948, Toronto Public Library Workers' Union, has bargained modest improvements to address precarity; more than half of Toronto library jobs are considered precarious.



In Mississauga, Ontario, the 390 members of CUPE 1989 went on strike for three weeks to make improvements for part-time workers, who make up more than half the workforce. The deal also cemented a wage hike for pages from near-minimum wage to \$15 per hour.

In BC, Grand Forks Public Library workers, members of CUPE 2254, bargained the elimination of a lower hourly wage for new hires.

Employers' demands to cut sick leave is another recent bargaining trend. The almost 60 members of CUPE 2974 in Essex County, Ontario went on strike over the employer's demands to cut sick time in half. The strike lasted 14 weeks and closed several branches.

Workers in public library boards are already the least likely to be paid for sick days. The CUPE National Library Workers' Survey on Precarious Employment found that 64 per cent of public library workers have access to paid sick days compared to the 80 per cent of library workers employed in municipal, school board and university libraries.

Finally, library workers and their local unions are taking on the battle to maintain and improve pensions. Carleton University workers in Ottawa, members of CUPE 2424, went on strike for four weeks to secure a deal that guaranteed a defined benefit pension plan and prevented the university from making unilateral changes to the plan.

Pensions

New pension information for CUPE members working in stand-alone public libraries shows that about 92 per cent of these members can participate in a registered pension plan. Defined benefit plans are the most common type of pension.

Most part-time and casual workers are excluded from workplace pension plans, or are required to meet high standards to be eligible. This hits workers at smaller library boards, mostly staffed by part-time workers, especially hard.

ALLIES

CUPE has engaged with allies in creative ways to promote and protect libraries. In Newfoundland and Labrador, CUPE participated in a pilot project on early literacy facilitation with the government and community partners. CUPE 2329 members facilitated the 12-session program.

In Toronto, CUPE 4948 does a tremendous amount of community outreach on the city budget. Every year the local uses Word on the Street, a national book and literacy fair, to connect with the 250,000 attendees about its campaign against budget cuts. The local's "librarian glasses" photo booth is incredibly popular.

CUPE members and staff participate in a variety of annual library conferences across the country, including the B.C. Library Association, Ontario Library Association, Atlantic Provinces Library Association and the Canadian Federation of Library Associations, to name a few.

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!