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## Red Cross home-care workers stage one-day strike in rain

By Tim Whitnell, Post Staff News

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Red Cross home-care workers in Burlington staged a one-day strike last week, picketing outside the organization's local office to protest stalled contract talks.

About two-dozen of Halton's 130 home-care personnel, most of whom are female and certified personal support workers (PSW), braved driving rain in front of the Red Cross office on Guelph Line to get across the message they are not happy with the state of negotiations and some of their current working conditions.

One-day strikes by other Red Cross homecare workers have previously taken place, in Sudbury and Own Sound.

The Red Cross' 3,000 personal support workers in Ontario, affiliated with Local 1 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), have been in a legal strike position since March 23. Their contract with the Red Cross expired July 31, 2008. Last summer, union members voted 88 per cent in favour of a strike mandate.

"The women and men who provide homecare support have been pushed to their limit. After months of bargaining, it's clear that a resolution will only be achieved if the government acts," said SEIU Local 1 Canada President Sharleen Stewart, in a press release.

Red Cross is one of the largest agencies under contract with the government to provide homecare services. Its members aid seniors, children with special needs and people recuperating from surgery. They provide in-home services like cooking, cleaning, washing and bathing.

SEIU Local 1 bargains directly with Red Cross officials. Red Cross bids on home-care services through the area Community Care Access Centre (CCAC). The CCAC gets its funding confirmed by the area Local Health Integration Network (LHIN), which gets its funding from the provincial government.

No hourly pay for travel time between jobs — except for a 32-cents-per-kilometre mileage rate — is at the heart of the contract impasse, said the secretary treasurer of Local 1.

"They are working for free basically while on the road," said Cathy Carroll, who noted homecare workers travel a lot from job to job.

She said all those hours also don't count toward work time, which impacts employees' ability to qualify for basic benefits like health and dental care. The unionized workers earn a low of \$10.50 per hour to a top rate of \$14 per hour.

"I was here when the Red Cross paid for travel time. They stopped doing it in 1996," said Barb Stares, a 57-year-old personal support worker with 17 years experience in Halton.

"Our hours are so variable; mine were down to 23 last week. How do you make a living?"

Red Cross spokesperson Tanya Elliott would not comment on specific issues but said they are ready to return to the bargaining table. Elliott noted that despite the one-day strike in Halton, the union agreed to provide service that day to high-priority clients. Red Cross services like transportation and first aid courses were not affected, she said.

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