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PRESS RELEASE

Language Rights of Federal Public Servants Unacceptably Violated While Negotiating for Fair Working Conditions

Representing 7,500 federal correctional officers across the country, the UCCO-SACC-CSN union, which is currently engaged in bargaining with the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat for a renewed collective agreement, denounces a significant, worrisome, and unprecedented violation of the spirit of the Official Languages Act.

For 20 years, and through four rounds of bargaining since the Union was created, the federal government has always provided simultaneous translation services in both official languages, French and English. Breaking completely with this practice, since January 2023, the federal government has threatened that unions must either give up simultaneous translation or pay 50% of the costs for this service, or else the government would refuse to negotiate.

The federal government justifies this by the need to use external translators in order to provide the service. The government adds that, in any case, the Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages does not have the power to force the government to provide and fund simultaneous translation at the negotiation table.

Government contempt raises concerns

Jeff Wilkins, UCCO-SACC-CSN National President, denounces the government's disregard for correctional officers as not only worrisome but dangerous:

“In negotiations, words matter. If all parties at the table cannot understand the content or context of the discussions, we cannot represent our members properly. Our members expect us to speak on their behalf at the bargaining table, and we cannot do this under these circumstances. In a perfect world, all the parties would be perfectly bilingual, but this is not the case, on either side of the negotiation table.”

Wilkins adds:

“Everyone must understand what is being said, and that responsibility rests with the employer, who has the duty to support both official languages in Canada. We are therefore asking the government to fulfill its legal obligation and provide translation.”

Language rights at the heart of Canadian democracy

This problem extends well beyond the concerns of correctional officers. Frédéric Lebeau, UCCO-SACC-CSN, National Vice-President, deplores the fact that the government will not allow the union to negotiate in good faith, in the language of their choice:

“As a union, we represent members across Canada, and, like them, our bargaining committee includes Anglophones and Francophones. Regardless of the official language they choose to use, they must be able to be understood in the language of their choice and understand what is being said at the negotiating table. It is their right, and it is also the right of the members they represent.”

“The right to discuss and to exchange with our federal employer, in French or in English, is at the heart of Canadian democracy,” remarks Lebeau. “It is neither an accommodation nor a favour granted to us, but an obligation—one that has been regularly reaffirmed by the highest authorities in the country.”

UCCO-SACC-CSN therefore invites the federal government to shoulder its responsibilities and provide quality language services when at the bargaining table with the unions with which it negotiates, as it has done for at least the last 20 years. Our union reaffirms, with the strongest emphasis, that this request is vital for smooth and fruitful negotiations. It is a matter of respect—for both parties at the table, for the history of Canada, and for the laws of our nation.

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About the Union

The Union of Canadian Correctional Officers (UCCO-SACC-CSN) represents over 7400 members in the five major regions of Canada: the Pacific, the Prairies, Ontario, Quebec, and the Atlantic. UCCO-SACC-CSN represents correctional officers in 49 federal institutions.

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