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News Public Service

### As union members face COVID-19 pandemic 'head on,' PSAC calls for feds to return to bargaining table

BY MIKE LAPOINTE

With union members "facing the pandemic head on" at our borders, in federal penitentiaries, and by processing millions of financial support claims under tight timelines, the head of Canada's largest federal public service union is calling for the federal government to return to the bargaining table to reach an elusive contract settlement for more than 140,000 federal public service workers as the COVID-19 crisis rumbles on.

"We've got thousands stepping up to the plate to get the job done, and some are doing completely new jobs wherever there has been a need to support the government's relief efforts," said Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) national president Chris Aylward in an interview with *The Hill Times*.

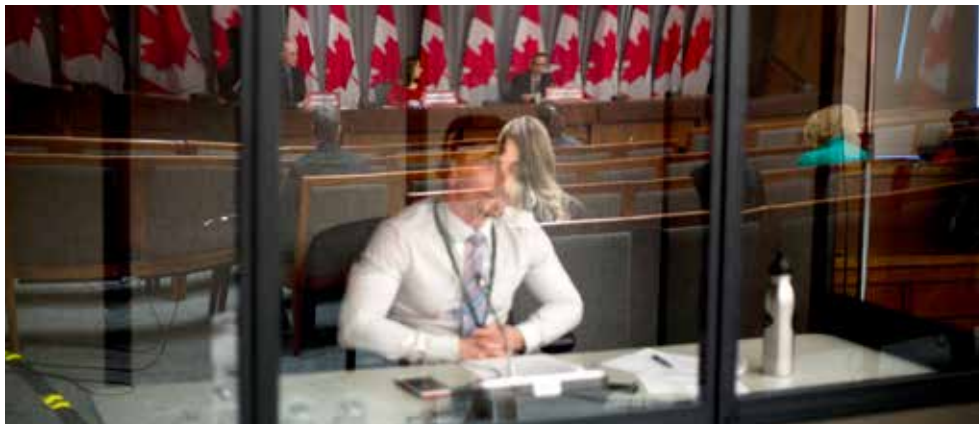
"They continue to do that without a fair contract, and we're not too sure why the federal government is so reluctant to go back to the bargaining table," he said, pointing to the Ontario government's recent settlement with provincial teachers' unions

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News Translators

## Interpreter injuries spike due to virtual Parliament, prompt calls for quality controls

'We are getting too close to our worst-case scenario,' says CAPE, the union representing staff interpreters on Parliament Hill.



BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT ALLEN

With subpar equipment and spotty connectivity, Parliament's virtual meetings have compromised the quality of interpreta-

tion and led to a rise in workplace injuries reported by interpreters, according to two groups representing parliamentary interpreters.

Inconsistent audio and visual quality and poor practices from

An interpreter works during a press conference in the West Block on March 27. The House says it's 'working closely' with MPs to make sure they have the right equipment, which interpreters say will reduce injuries among their number. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Parliamentarians and witnesses have made interpreters' jobs more difficult since the House of Commons moved to virtual meetings,

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News NAFTA 2.0

### Some politicians, dairy groups say the feds promised new NAFTA would start in August, while trade experts say start date was being hurried by Trump

BY NEIL MOSS

Some opposition Parliamentarians say the federal government misled them on when the new NAFTA will come into force, believing they had an assurance that the updated trade pact would start at the beginning of August and not a month before, to the detriment of Canada's dairy sector.

But trade experts say the Trump administration forced the Canadian government's hand with a desire to see the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) come into force briskly.

Conservative Senate Leader Don Plett (Landmark, Man.) told *The Hill Times* that he was given "a direct promise" from Senator Marc Gold (Stadacona, Que.), the government's representative in the Senate, that the CUSMA wouldn't enter into force until Aug. 1 in order to guarantee

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News COVID-19

## The scramble for PPE: 'This country has never seen procurement like it is occurring now'

BY LAURA RYCKEWAERT

From face masks, to medical gowns, testing kits, ventila-

tors, and beyond, the federal government has been working to secure millions of pieces of medical and personal protective

equipment needed in the fight against COVID-19 in a massive, cross-ministry and -jurisdictional collaborative effort that's been

described as "unprecedented" and "24/7" for those involved.

"Since the Second World War there probably hasn't been a

whole-of-government concerted effort to respond to something like this," said Neil Brodie, a vice-president with Bluesky Strategy Group and a former Harper-era cabinet staffer, who spent two years, from 2006 to 2008, working as a

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# Interpreter injuries spike due to virtual Parliament, prompt calls for quality controls

'We are getting too close to our worst-case scenario,' says CAPE, the union representing staff interpreters on Parliament Hill.

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starting with the Health and Finance committees at the end of March. This creates an environment where interpreters miss words and potentially meaning, MPs were warned by a recent committee witness, and with the bulk of translation reportedly being done by English speakers into French, Parliament may not be living up to its legal obligations to provide equal access to proceedings in both official languages.

More than 50 per cent of injuries reported between the beginning of 2019 and May 1 have taken place in the last three weeks, a representative of the Canadian Association of Professional Employees (CAPE) told the House Procedure and Affairs Committee (PROC) on May 4. With reports of headaches, nausea, and Tinnitus, he implored MPs to act on the union's recommendations.

"The cognitive load is much heavier," explained CAPE president Greg Phillips, since the House's regular proceedings—suspended since March 13 until at least May 25—and gatherings moved virtual. Several committees, including PROC, have since resumed meetings through the video-conferencing service Zoom, and last week Parliament made history with the first virtual sitting of its special COVID-19 committee, which will meet twice weekly online and in-person on Wednesdays.

"This means shorter assignments, shorter shifts, more interpreters going on sick leave for days or being permanently redeployed to other non-virtual assignments at their request," said Mr. Phillips.

The pool of available interpreters is shrinking due to injuries, he added, from an already diminished number resulting from the pandemic, with 40 of the roughly 70 staff unable to work due to childcare and other health issues. Interpreters typically work six-hour shifts, but the average has dropped to about four hours with remote interpretation.

"We are getting too close to our worst-case scenario, which is that too many interpreters end up needing rest and healing at the same time. We fear interpreters are getting dangerously close to being unable to keep up with the demand and having to refuse assignments in too great numbers to find replacements."

Liberal MP Ryan Turnbull (Whitby, Ont.) said he was "deeply concerned" that the injuries have coincided with Parliament's move to virtual meetings, echoing the sentiment of most on the committee.

With more committee meetings likely to be scheduled, Bloc Québécois MP Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, Que.) questioned whether that need could be met.

Numbers are clearly "dwindling," Mr. Phillips replied. "There's going to be problems."

Precise injury counts weren't available, and he told MPs it's better tracked by the employer, the Translation Bureau. In an interview after the meeting, Mr. Phillips said at least 47 incidents have been reported since between March 31 and May 1, with the bulk coming in recent weeks.

The Translation Bureau said by email May 5 that employee health is a top priority and it has taken measures to protect



Greg Phillips, president of the Canadian Association of Professional Employees, says interpreter numbers are dwindling. Photograph courtesy of ParIVu screenshot



Nicole Gagnon, with the International Association of Conference Interpreters, worries Canadians aren't getting equal access to proceedings in both official languages with the current problems with a virtual Parliament. Screenshot courtesy of ParIVu

them, including providing interpreters with sound-limiting headsets to protect against acoustic shock. The Bureau said it requires its clients, the House of Commons in this case, to have in place technical measures that promote both interpreter health and high-quality interpretation.

CAPE said the bureau is conducting a study on those incidents, but the bureau did not respond when asked about the number.

## Quality of interpretation undermined: AIIC

At the same meeting, Nicole Gagnon, Canadian advocacy lead for the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), said it should be mandatory for meeting participants to have proper microphones to ensure good sound quality—like by using a headset—and they should not be using Wi-Fi because it's too unreliable.

Important principles are at stake, she argued, when communicating a Parliamentarian's words accurately and in real time. Canadians have a right to hear those words in both official languages, and she said that cannot be set aside, especially during a crisis.

"If you can't hear, you can't interpret," said Ms. Gagnon in an interview last week. "Our job is not to provide the gist of what's being said. ... In the rush to get virtual, compromises have been made that undermine quality of interpretation."

House spokesperson Heather Bradley said the administration is "working closely" with MPs to make sure they can connect to meetings using "approved devices and equipment, including headsets."

She highlighted House Speaker Anthony Rota's (Nipissing-Timiskaming, Ont.) April 24 message to MPs preparing for the first virtual meeting, encouraging them to have one-on-one training and promising the House would help ensure they have the required technological equipment. To address connectivity issues, he told them to use either the House of Commons' network or an Internet connection. Most constituency offices have reliable access and connectivity.

Mr. Rota also told PROC during the May 4 meeting that Parliament can "eventually" go fully virtual, if MPs decide that's necessary amid the pandemic, asserting that the technical issues that have so far disrupted the pace of proceedings can be easily fixed and addressed.

Both Ms. Gagnon and Mr. Phillips said it's clear MPs, the House, and the Translation Bureau are aware of the issues and are responding, but urged quicker action.

The working conditions for interpreters have changed dramatically. Normally, they work in one booth as teams of three, but now the workers are in the booths alone, or separated by Plexiglas, explained Ms. Gagnon. That loss of teamwork has also had an effect. Interpreters would jot down numbers being said to help save time, or support their colleagues in other ways, adding another layer of difficulty on top of the technology glitches. In some cases, she said situations make it so they now have to do "bi-directional" interpreting, or speaking into their second language. Ideally, interpreters are translating into their first language, with bi-directional translation generally seen as lesser in quality.

Staff at the Translation Bureau have covered the first five weeks of the virtual meetings, and for the last week Parliament has also pulled from a pool of roughly 35 accredited freelancers to support, she said.

At a PROC meeting on April 29, the Translation Bureau reported on its activities to support interpreters, including providing parking spaces so they don't have to use public transit, providing tablets so they can avoid handling printed documents, and disinfecting booths twice a day.

Nathalie Laliberté, vice-president at the Translation Bureau, also spoke of criteria needed for remote interpretation, though all measures have not been adopted.

All participants must wear a headset with a microphone, must appear via video-conference so that the interpreter can see their facial expressions and clearly communicate the tone of their message, wait their turn to speak, and follow the rules. A technician is in the room with the interpreters at all times, she said, and should do

a sound check before meetings begin.

Protecting worker safety will take more than equipment, said Mr. Phillips, who submitted recommendations to PROC prior to the meeting.

The standards and conditions for interpretation services must be communicated to all clerks, Parliamentarians, witnesses, and the technical departments in advance to meetings, according to the submission. Session chairs must be aware of the standards and hold participants to them, and should go over the standards before each session. Parliament should also improve the videoconferencing system so it meets international interpretation standards for virtual meetings.

It's important MPs don't wait on these guidelines, he said, though he knows it could take time.

"My concern is their action might not happen fast enough," said Mr. Phillips.

PROC's report following its study on Parliament's transition to virtual sittings is due on May 15.

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