

NOT JUST ONE "TOUGH YEAR": THE NEED FOR A REVIEW OF OMERS INVESTMENT PERFORMANCE

May 2021



Executive Summary

CUPE Ontario represents nearly half of the 289,000 active members of the Ontario Municipal Employees Retirement System (OMERS) – the province’s Defined Benefit (DB) pension plan for municipal, school board and certain other public sector workers.

While most pension plans had strong returns in 2020, OMERS recently reported billions of dollars of losses over the year. This has prompted CUPE Ontario to examine how OMERS investments have performed compared to other large pension plans and funds. We have also looked at how OMERS has performed against its own internal benchmarks.

We find that OMERS underperformance is not a new or a short-term problem. Specifically, we find that:

- 1) OMERS longer-term performance has significantly lagged behind other large pension funds and plans, in periods both before and after 2020 results were in.
- 2) OMERS has now fallen behind even some of its own internal longer-term return benchmarks – a troubling fact that, contrary to industry standards, is not disclosed in OMERS Annual Report.

Since investment returns fund the vast majority of pensions paid from the plan, returns are incredibly important to DB plan members. Lower investment returns may lead to members being asked to pay more into the plan, or could result in additional pressure for more benefit cuts.

Despite requests, OMERS has not committed to an independent, transparent review of its investment decisions.

CUPE Ontario feels these issues are so serious that a fully transparent expert review of OMERS investment strategies, returns, and internal performance assessment is urgently needed. This review should be conducted by the plan sponsors and stakeholders themselves (the risk-bearing parties to OMERS) and should be fully independent of OMERS staff, who have a clear conflict of interest in conducting a review of their own performance. We invite the other sponsors of OMERS, including our employer counterparts and the broader community of the plan’s organizational stakeholders, to support this proposal and to work with us to conduct this review.



Introduction

CUPE Ontario represents 125,000 plan members of the Ontario Municipal Employees Retirement System (OMERS). We are the largest sponsor in this defined benefit (DB) pension plan that is – at least in theory – jointly-controlled by plan sponsors like CUPE Ontario and other unions and employers.



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CUPE Ontario strongly believes that DB pension plans are the best way to provide a decent and secure retirement for our hard-working members. Large public sector DB plans like OMERS allow for an efficient pooling and sharing of costs and risks between employers and plan members. DB plans allow members to know what their pensions will be in retirement. This security is incredibly important for plan members. However, it is not only retirees who benefit from good, secure pension benefits. DB pension plans have been shown to have positive macroeconomic effects on the economy as a whole.¹ The concerns we raise in this report are not concerns with the DB model itself; we continue to strongly believe that DB plans are a model worth not only defending, but extending to all workers.

For a number of years, we have been concerned with the lower level of OMERS pension fund investment returns in comparison to those of other similar plans. OMERS recently reported that the plan had a very bad year in 2020. This has led CUPE Ontario to perform a more in-depth examination of publicly-available annual reporting documents to determine how, in our view, OMERS is performing compared to the seven other large (\$50 billion+) pension plans and funds in Canada.² OMERS themselves refer to this club of large plans and funds as the “eight leading Canadian pension plan investment managers,” and occasionally takes coordinated activity with them.³

¹ Conference Board of Canada, “Economic Impact of British Columbia’s Public Sector Pension Plans,” October 2013; Boston Consulting Group, “Measuring Impact of Canadian Pension Funds,” October 2015; Ontario Teachers Pension Plan News Release, “New analysis confirms that defined benefit pensions provide significant benefits to Canadian economy,” October 22, 2013.

² Unless otherwise specified, the data in this document has been compiled from publicly-available annual reporting of the respective plans. With the exception of CDPQ, returns are as reported in these documents, and are net. CDPQ results were reported gross of some expenses, and have been reduced by 0.2% to best approximate a net return. Longer-term periods are annualized, and are as reported by the respective plans.

³ OMERS News Release, “CEOs of Eight Leading Canadian Pension Plan Investment Managers Call on Companies and Investors to Help Drive Sustainable and Inclusive Economic Growth,” November 25, 2020.



**AS BAD AS
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TERM PROBLEM**

Due to their scale, these large pension plans and funds are able to invest in asset classes that are typically not available to smaller investors or individuals. At the same time, we acknowledge that these eight plans are not completely similar: they have their own governance structures, asset mixes, risk appetites, and reporting periods, all of which are described in the public documents of the respective plans. However, we also acknowledge that many of these differences are the result of specific investment decisions made by the respective plans and funds. We therefore believe that there is value in comparing the performance of this small set of large funds, particularly over longer-term periods.

Acronym	Name	Assets Under Management (\$ Billion)	Funded Status in Most Recent Annual Report	Most Recent Annual Reporting Date
CPPIB	Canada Pension Plan Investment Board	410	N/A	March 31, 2020
CDPQ	Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec	366	108% (RREGOP)	Dec 31, 2020
OTPP	Ontario Teachers Pension Plan	221	103%	Dec 31, 2020
PSP	Public Sector Pension Investment Board	170	111% (Public Service Plan)	March 31, 2020
OMERS	Ontario Municipal Employees Retirement System	105	97%	Dec 31, 2020
HOOPP	Healthcare of Ontario Pension Plan	104	119%	Dec 31, 2020
BC MPP	BC Municipal Pension Plan (investments managed by BCI, the BC Investment Management Corporation)	59 (MPP) 171 (BCI)	105%	Dec 31, 2019 (MPP) March 31, 2020 (BCI)
LAPP	Alberta Local Authorities Pension Plan (investments managed by Alberta Investment Management Corporation)	50 (LAPP) 119 (AIMCO)	119%	Dec 31, 2019

In some cases, the pension funds above manage the investments of several pension plans (CDPQ, PSP, BCI, AIMCO are all such cases). In those cases, we look most closely at the returns at an individual plan level for the respective client plan that most closely compares to OMERS.

We have also looked at how OMERS has performed against its own internal benchmarks.

This review has resulted in some very troubling findings which suggest that, as bad as OMERS performance was in 2020, this is not a new or a short-term problem. We found evidence that OMERS longer-term return performance has significantly lagged behind



HIGHER INVESTMENT RETURNS WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER FOR OMERS PLAN MEMBERS, AND FOR OMERS EMPLOYERS.

other large pension funds and plans. We also found that OMERS has now fallen behind even some of its own internal longer-term return benchmarks – a troubling fact that, contrary to industry standards, is not disclosed in OMERS Annual Report.

Investment results are incredibly important to DB plan members because compounded returns typically fund the vast majority of the pensions that are eventually paid. OMERS indicates that investment returns are expected to fund approximately 70% of the pensions paid by the plan.⁴ When investment returns are insufficient, it can put upward pressure on required contribution rates for both members and employers. Most other plans have now returned to pension surpluses since the global financial crisis more than a decade ago, but OMERS continues its long climb out of deficit. Contribution levels were a central talking point from OMERS when plan decision-makers removed guaranteed indexation in 2020. And we expect that, in the months to come, OMERS will once again be looking to plan members to bear the burden of plan funding issues that are, in part, a result of these investment returns. Meanwhile other pension plans, who have had better returns, are currently holding significant surpluses, many have lower contribution rates and some are even improving pension benefits.⁵ Higher investment returns would have been better for OMERS plan members, and for OMERS employers.

Despite requests⁶, OMERS has not committed to an independent, transparent review of its investment decisions. Any reviews that have taken place have been behind closed doors at OMERS and have not been shared with sponsors or described in any detail. While OMERS has outlined several investment policy changes it plans to make, its overriding message remains: “the fundamentals of our long-term strategy remain sound, and we will continue to advance that strategy.”⁷



A FULLY TRANSPARENT EXPERT REVIEW OF OMERS INVESTMENT STRATEGIES, RETURNS, AND INTERNAL PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT IS URGENTLY NEEDED.

CUPE Ontario feels these issues are so serious that a fully transparent expert review of OMERS investment strategies, returns, and internal performance assessment is urgently needed. This review should be conducted by the plan sponsors and stakeholders themselves (the risk-bearing parties to OMERS) and should be fully independent of OMERS staff, who have a clear conflict of interest in conducting a review of their own performance. We invite the other sponsors of OMERS, including our employer counterparts and the broader community of the plan’s organizational stakeholders, to support this proposal and to work with us to conduct this review.

⁴ OMERS 2020 Annual Report, p. 2.

⁵ HOOPP News Release, “HOOPP posts 11.42% return in 2020, surpasses \$100 billion in assets,” March 31, 2021.

⁶ CUPE Ontario Press Release, “We won’t pay for the mistakes of OMERS executives,” February 25, 2021.

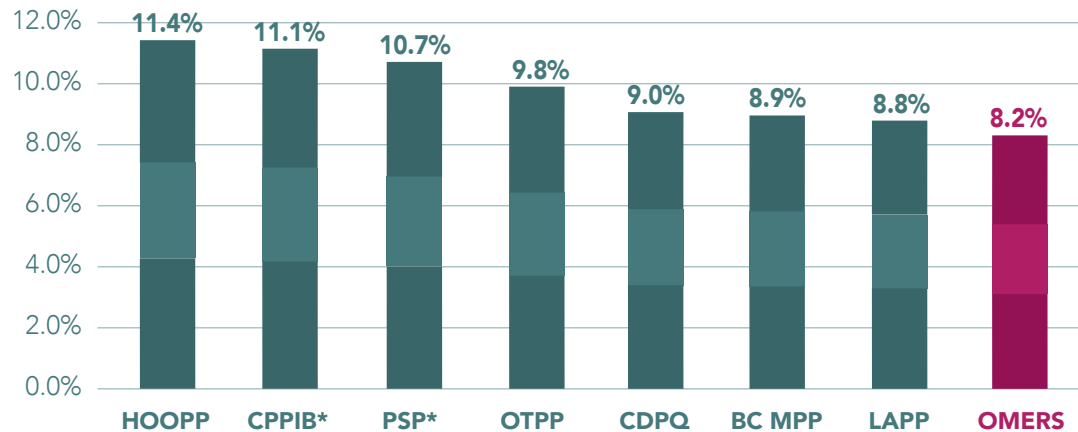
⁷ OMERS 2020 Annual Report, p. 23.



Our five principal findings are as follows:

- CUPE Ontario’s concerns go beyond one “difficult” year in 2020. OMERS 10-year annualized returns trailed those of the other major funds and plans before the COVID crisis hit.**

10-Year Annualized Returns at 2019



*To March 31, 2019, otherwise to Dec 31, 2019
Source: Respective Annual Reports



**THIS WAS
A HISTORIC
ANNUAL
UNDER-
PERFORMANCE
COMPARED TO
BENCHMARKS.**

- OMERS 2020 investment performance was especially poor**

OMERS 2020 annual return (-2.7%) fell far short of the plan’s own benchmark for the year of +6.9%. This was a historic annual underperformance compared to benchmarks.

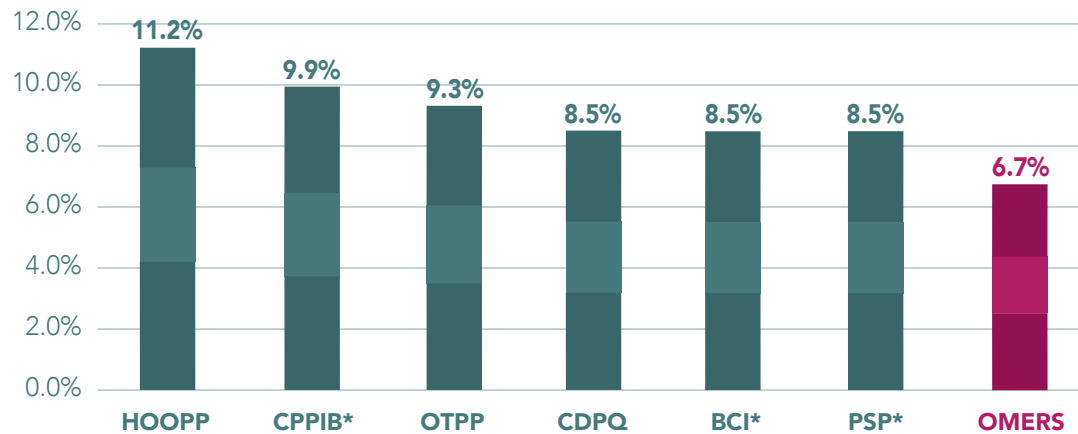
Other plans, however, have reported very strong annual returns for calendar year 2020:

2020 ANNUAL RETURNS	
HOOPP	+ 11.4%
RBC Pension Plan Universe ⁸	+ 9.2%
OTPP	+ 8.6%
CDPQ	+ 7.5%
OMERS	- 2.7%

⁸ RBC Investor & Treasury Services, “Canadian DB pensions post near-double-digit returns despite historic, turbulent year,” January 29, 2021.

This negative result led OMERS 10-year annualized return to fall from 8.2% to 6.7%.

10-Year Annualized Returns at 2020



*To March 31, 2020 otherwise to Dec 31, 2020

The chart above reports the most recent available return information for the respective funds and plans as disclosed in their annual reports. LAPP and BC MPP have yet to report their December 31, 2020 results. AIMCO has also not fully reported its 2020 results. However, BCI (the investment agent for BC MPP and other BC public sector plans) has reported its March 31, 2020 results and has been included here. The chart can be updated as more plans report their 2020 investment returns.



OMERS DOES NOT REPORT CLEAR COMPARISONS OF THE PLAN'S LONG-TERM ANNUALIZED RETURNS TO ITS CORRESPONDING LONG-TERM BENCHMARKS.

3. OMERS does not report comparisons of its annualized long-term returns to its own benchmarks.

Benchmarking is a common practice where an investment *standard or goal* is set, against which *actual plan returns* are compared for ongoing assessment of investment performance. OMERS itself describes a benchmark as “a point of reference against which the performance of an investment is measured.”⁹ Comparisons of returns vs. benchmarks are typically done on a 1-year basis, but it is very common for long-term annualized comparisons to also be disclosed. Reporting these benchmarks is standard practice for pension plans and third-party investment managers. Even individual investment vehicles like mutual funds and ETFs typically provide details on how their performance compares to both annual and long-term benchmarks.

The OMERS Administration Corporation (AC) sets OMERS benchmarks each year, as described in the “Performance Management” section of the OMERS investment policy document.¹⁰ OMERS Annual Reports describe how these benchmarks are constructed for each asset class. For many years, these reports stated that “Our goal is to earn stable returns that meet or exceed our benchmarks.” OMERS Annual Reports compare OMERS single-year returns to the plan’s single-year benchmarks. However, in sections describing investment performance, **OMERS does not report clear comparisons of the plan’s long-term annualized returns to its corresponding long-term benchmarks.** While the Annual Report does compare performance to the plan’s discount rate and a long-term return expectation set by the AC Board, it omits comparisons of the plan’s long-term performance against their own long-term benchmarks.

⁹ OMERS 2015 Annual Report, p. 131.

¹⁰ OMERS “Statement of Investment Policies and Procedures – Primary Plan,” January 1, 2021.



IN THE ABSENCE OF LONGER-TERM COMPARATIVE DATA, STAKEHOLDERS FACE SERIOUS OBSTACLES IN EVALUATING PERFORMANCE

OMERS believes that “paying pensions over decades means a long-term approach.”¹¹ But in the absence of longer-term comparative data, stakeholders face serious obstacles in evaluating performance. A review of historical Annual Reports shows that OMERS had a longstanding practice of reporting these long-term comparisons, but OMERS stopped this reporting, without explanation, in 2013. **This is dramatically out of step with other pension plans and is, in our view, a serious lack of transparency from OMERS.**

	HOOPP	CPPIB	PSP	OTPP	CDPQ	BC MPP	LAPP	OMERS
Does annual report compare annualized longer-term returns to corresponding benchmarks?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO

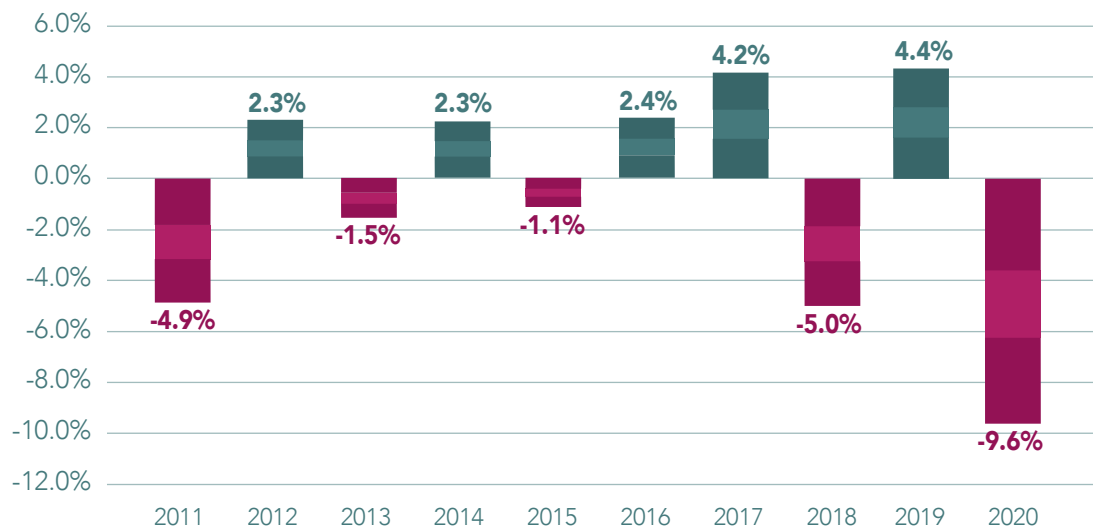


THIS IS DRAMATICALLY OUT OF STEP WITH OTHER PENSION PLANS AND IS, IN OUR VIEW, A SERIOUS LACK OF TRANSPARENCY FROM OMERS.

The OMERS Statement of Investment Policies and Procedures states that “performance reporting is consistent with industry recognized practices.”¹² The OMERS Statement of Investment Beliefs says that “articulating our investment goals and performance measures helps ensure clear accountability.”¹³ We do not believe OMERS is meeting these standards of reporting and accountability on this point.

4. OMERS 5 and 10-Year Returns are now below OMERS own benchmarks for these periods.

OMERS Annual Returns vs OMERS Annual Benchmark



Source: OMERS 2020 Annual Report, Ten-Year Financial Review, p. 142.

¹¹ OMERS News Release, “OMERS Reports 2020 Financial Results: paying pensions over decades means a long-term approach,” February 25, 2021.

¹² OMERS “Statement of Investment Policies and Procedures,” January 1, 2021. www.omers.com/governance-manual-policies-and-guidelines

¹³ OMERS “Statement of Investment Beliefs,” January 1, 2020. www.omers.com/governance-manual-policies-and-guidelines

	OMERS Return	OMERS Benchmark	Difference
5-Year Annualized	6.5%	7.4%	-0.9%
10-Year Annualized	6.7%	7.3%	-0.6%

Source: Returns from OMERS 2020 Annual Report
Annualized Long-Term benchmarks not referenced in Annual Report and were reported verbally to CUPE by OMERS on our request.

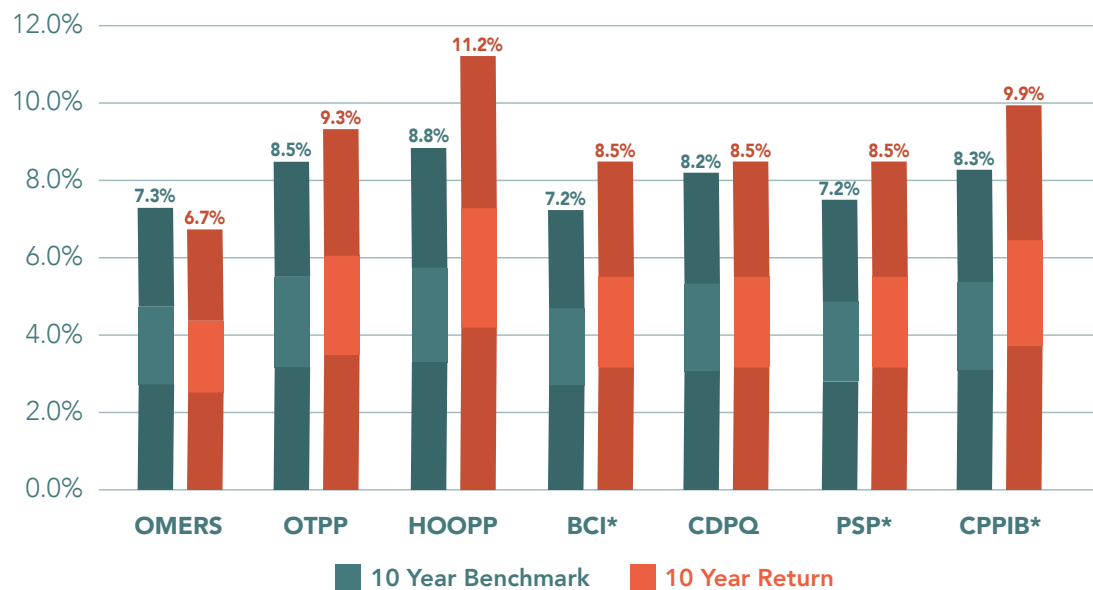
The 5 and 10-year annualized benchmark figures above were not disclosed in the OMERS 2020 Annual Report. OMERS provided these numbers verbally to CUPE Ontario upon our request. Previous OMERS Annual Reports normally included a statement that “Our goal is to earn stable returns that meet or exceed our benchmarks.”¹⁴ This statement appears to have been struck from the 2020 Annual Report.

We also note that, OMERS benchmarks are comparatively low over this period when examined alongside other plans. We believe this is due to a different benchmarking methodology for certain investments at OMERS compared to industry standards. The other major plans and funds that have reported 2020 results, however, are all ahead of their 10-year benchmarks as of their most recent annual reports.



THE OTHER MAJOR PLANS AND FUNDS THAT HAVE REPORTED 2020 RESULTS, HOWEVER, ARE ALL AHEAD OF THEIR 10-YEAR BENCHMARKS AS OF THEIR MOST RECENT ANNUAL REPORTS.

10-Year Returns vs 10 Year Benchmarks to 2020



*To March 31, 2020 otherwise to Dec 31, 2020

¹⁴ 2010 Annual Report p. 27; 2011 Annual Report p. 25; 2012 Annual Report p. 23; 2013 Annual Report p. 22; 2014 Annual Report p. 12; 2015 Annual Report p. 9; 2016 Annual Report p. 33; 2017 Annual Report p. 33; 2018 Annual Report p. 33; 2019 Annual Report p. 42; 2020 Annual Report N/A.



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The impact on OMERS of these longer-term below-benchmark returns has been significant. The difference of 0.6% between OMERS actual annualized 10-year investment returns of 6.7% and its benchmark of 7.3% has meant an absolute return outcome that would have been roughly 6% higher after these 10 years (all other factors being equal). Even achieving just this benchmark return on an annualized 10 year basis would have resulted in an asset base of roughly \$6 billion higher current plan assets.¹⁵ This better result would have brought OMERS reported funding level into surplus.

This difference is even greater if we were to compare the impact of OMERS investment performance to that of any of these other large plans. For example, had OMERS achieved the actual 10-year annualized returns of the OTPP of 9.3% (just below the average of the other six plans listed above), the OMERS asset base would now be (all other factors being equal) approximately 27% higher than OMERS actual asset level. In dollar-value terms, this difference represents roughly \$28 billion more in assets after the 10-year period from 2011 to 2020. Had OMERS achieved these better results, the plan would now hold a very substantial surplus.

5. OMERS 20-year return is not above its 20-year benchmark.

Upon request from CUPE Ontario, OMERS also verbally disclosed that its 20-year return is equal to its 20-year benchmark of 6%. In our view, it is troubling that the plan has not outperformed its benchmark over this long period, and that this comparison is also not disclosed in OMERS annual reporting.

¹⁵ The alternative scenarios for investment performance results outlined in this section are necessarily approximate as they are based on data that is made publicly available by OMERS, and were generated using the reported OMERS asset base as at December 31, 2010 of \$53.3 billion.





Conclusion

CUPE Ontario has serious concerns with OMERS investment performance, and with what we believe is a troubling lack of transparency about these issues. In our view, these issues cannot be dismissed as a one-year problem.



THESE ISSUES CANNOT BE DISMISSED AS A ONE-YEAR PROBLEM.

We anticipate that these long-term, below-benchmark investment returns are very likely to lead directly to yet another round of proposals to reduce pension benefits payable to current actives and future retirees. OMERS has already eliminated the guarantee of indexation of pension benefits for service after 2022, and OMERS management has indicated it will be examining further changes in plan design. OMERS has recently stated in writing to CUPE that “the OMERS pension plan has been facing sustainability issues for some time now and the investment results of 2020 have amplified the need to address those issues.” At the recent 2021 OMERS AGM, OMERS Sponsors Corporation CEO Michael Rolland stated that “There are no guarantees as to what decisions we will have to make based on our performance...it’s a long term performance we need to look at...the results of 2020 did have an impact...and that’s why we’re taking a look at it.”



WE ANTICIPATE THAT THESE LONG-TERM, BELOW-BENCHMARK INVESTMENT RETURNS ARE VERY LIKELY TO LEAD DIRECTLY TO YET ANOTHER ROUND OF PROPOSALS TO REDUCE PENSION BENEFITS PAYABLE TO CURRENT ACTIVES AND FUTURE RETIREES.

CUPE Ontario is the largest sponsor representing plan members in OMERS, with over 125,000 active members in the plan. It is true that CUPE Ontario appoints representatives to both the OMERS Administrative Corporation and the OMERS Sponsors Corporation. However, because of restrictive confidentiality rules at both boards, our representatives are unable to keep CUPE Ontario fully-informed about what is really happening at OMERS governing boards, and the decisions that are being made about our members’ hard-earned retirement savings. We do not believe this is how well-governed jointly-sponsored pension plans are supposed to function. The result is that we feel that we are a plan sponsor in name only. Our members are not being well-served by a structure that effectively cuts them out of playing the oversight function they should over their pension plan.



WE ARE NOT CONFIDENT THAT OMERS MANAGEMENT ITSELF HAS TAKEN, OR IS PLANNING TO TAKE, SUFFICIENT STEPS TO CRITICALLY EXAMINE ITS OWN PERFORMANCE.

These barriers will not stop CUPE Ontario from doing everything we can to ensure these concerns about OMERS investment performance are addressed. Based on their public comments to date, we are not confident that OMERS management itself has taken, or is planning to take, sufficient steps to critically examine its own performance, nor are we confident that plan members or sponsors and organizational stakeholders will receive a transparent reporting of any such review.

Therefore, CUPE Ontario is calling on other plan sponsors from both sides of the table to work with us to commission a fully transparent and independent expert review of the investment program at OMERS. This review should be conducted in the open by the sponsors and stakeholders themselves, and not behind closed doors at OMERS. Ensuring our pension returns are as strong as they can be is not a partisan issue, nor is it an issue that the member and employer side of the table should have a difference of opinion on. We want to work with other OMERS sponsors and stakeholders to address these issues for the good of all OMERS members.



ENSURING OUR PENSION RETURNS ARE AS STRONG AS THEY CAN BE IS NOT A PARTISAN ISSUE, NOR IS IT AN ISSUE THAT THE MEMBER AND EMPLOYER SIDE OF THE TABLE SHOULD HAVE A DIFFERENCE OF OPINION ON. WE WANT TO WORK WITH OTHER OMERS SPONSORS AND STAKEHOLDERS TO ADDRESS THESE ISSUES FOR THE GOOD OF ALL OMERS MEMBERS.

