

Waves of staff walk across picket lines

Strike participation still strong, union says, after 248 apply to go back to work

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The number of striking Toronto civic workers who want to return to work has almost doubled in the past week, with no quick end in sight to the 10-day-old labour dispute.

As of Tuesday, 248 unionized employees had “applied to cross the picket line,” said city spokeswoman Patricia Trott, compared to about 130 who asked last week.

A spokesman for one of the two civic unions on strike since June 22 discounted the development.

“Our lines have been very strong and we are happy with the participation rate,” said Robert Lamoureux of Local 79 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

With his local and CUPE Local 416 at loggerheads with the city over a new contract – and no signs of a breakthrough – Toronto residents prepared for Canada Day celebrations with no city-run events and rising complaints about temporary garbage drop-off sites in parks.

At Christie Pits, one of 19 temporary dumps opened last week for residential and commercial garbage during the strike, area residents continued to heckle drivers as they arrived to deposit their trash in a hockey rink in the park.

“We know garbage disposal continues to be a concern for residents of Toronto,” city manager Joe Pennachetti told reporters at a daily briefing. “We will continue to work closely with communities to resolve any concerns.”

He offered no estimate of when the strike might end, but urged residents to “respect their neighbours and allow them to dispose of their waste.”

With only a skeleton staff of managers and supervisors, general manager of solid waste Geoff Rathbone said the city has issued “close to 200” illegal dumping fines and thousands of warnings.

Although some people have expressed concerns the city may put more garbage drop-off locations in parks – a sure sign the strike is expected to be prolonged – officials said no such move was needed immediately.

Mr. Rathbone said the existing sites are, on average, 20 per cent full, about what officials had expected at this point in the labour disruption.

“On a day to day basis, we will evaluate the situation,” he said, leaving the door open to adding sites.

On one happy note, Mr. Pennachetti announced the return, starting tomorrow, of farmers' markets at seven city squares, including Nathan Phillips. The vendors will be expected to clean up without the usual support from city workers.

As for the negotiations, neither side reported progress on key sticking points that include city demands for a change in sick-day benefits, and union demands for wages similar to those awarded other Toronto employees.

“There is no clear path to a settlement, as long as the city has its concessions on the table,” said CUPE Local 416 spokeswoman Pat Daley.

Mr. Pennachetti said “affordability is a key issue for us in 2009 and beyond.”