

City, unions declare Toronto strike's end pending ratification

Inside and outside workers could be back on the job this week after weekend of negotiations result in separate deals

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Toronto's municipal workers strike is over but for a ratification vote after two union locals representing indoor and outdoor workers reached tentative agreements on the 36th day of their walkout.

CUPE Local 79 president Ann Dembinski confirmed this afternoon that a deal has been struck, following a similar announcement earlier today by her counterpart with Local 416.

Workers could be back on the job as early as this week.

Mayor David Miller said the terms of the tentative deal -- which will remain confidential until workers vote on the deal Wednesday -- meet the goals he and the city laid out at the start of talks.

"They [the terms] are fair to workers, affordable to Torontonians and will allow the city the flexibility it needs," he said, adding that "without question, this has been a difficult period."

Asked directly, the Mayor refused to say whether the union agreed to give up its sick-day plan, a controversial program that allows full-time municipal employees to bank 18 sick days a year and cash them out at retirement. The program had been a stumbling block to a deal.

City Manager Joseph Pennachetti said the city would move quickly to resume services, but that details on timing would be sparse until the tentative agreement is ratified. The unions are planning a ratification vote Wednesday; the earliest city council could ratify the deal is Friday.

"We need to rely on some additional patience and understanding in the days to come ... we will work as quickly as possible to resume full services," Mr. Pennachetti said.

In a news release, the city elaborated on why it could take some time to get services up and running again: "It will take several days in many operations and program areas before the City can offer full service to residents and businesses. For example, swimming pools must be cleaned and refilled, childcare centres must be reopened, cleaned and stocked with food, parks need maintenance and grass cutting, license renewals and inspection applications must be processed, and many other matters must be addressed."

Ms. Dembinski told reporters the strike "should never have happened."

"Labour relations have been set back decades. It will not be the same for years to come," she said.

Even as Ms. Dembinski spoke about the disappointment her members felt over Mr. Miller's handling of the strike, the mayor and his city manager were across the street at city hall holding a competing press conference that trumped the end of her announcement on live TV newscasts.



Early this morning, flanked by members of his bargaining committee, CUPE Local 416 president Mark Ferguson announced the “framework for a deal,” nearly nine hours after a self-imposed midnight deadline had lapsed.

“The deal we reached we believe to be a fair deal,” Mr. Ferguson said. “It’s a deal that we are proud of.”



Mr. Ferguson represents 6,200 outdoor workers, including garbage collectors, drivers and paramedics.

The breakthrough comes on day 36 of a walkout that has shut down curbside garbage collection, city-run daycares, recreation centres and other city business, from building permit and construction to routine restaurant inspections.

At the temporary dump site at Moss Park, the news of Local 416’s tentative deal was met with cheers. “It’s awesome. We were happy,” said Robyn Tarulli, a single mother of two and a co-ordinator of the kids’ program at Frankland Community Centre. “We were happy and yelling.”

Ms. Tarulli, a member of Local 79, said she’s a month or two behind on bills and had to cancel a vacation to Italy. “They just want to go back and work,” she said of her colleagues. “At this point they’re not even worried about getting a raise.”



Allan Stockell, 61, also a member of Local 79, praised the tactics of the outside workers president, who set a midnight Sunday deadline that sped up the pace of talks over the weekend. “It may have been very smart on the part of Mark Ferguson to take that bold move. I just hope our president, Ann Dembinski, doesn’t drop the ball.”

He said that he hoped Local 416 wouldn’t leave Local 79 behind.

“They say they won’t go back without us,” Mr. Stockell said. “And if they do it will be an awful mess.”

Tony Cianciotta, a film teacher in Toronto, who dropped off his trash at Moss Park this morning, said he thinks a deal should have been reached in one day, not 36. “I think both sides are completely wrong because they’ve had all the time in the world,” he said. “There is absolutely no reason in the world why a bunch of guys can’t sit in a room and come to an agreement.”

Mr. Cianciotta had harsh words for Mayor David Miller. “There’s absolutely no question about it: I think the guy’s egotistical,” he said. “This thing [the strike] has taken over for a long time. [The way he’s handled the

strike is] political suicide. He's definitely overstayed his welcome as far as I'm concerned.”

At issue were wages, seniority provisions and a city demand for the end to a sick-leave benefit program that allows workers to bank, carry over and cash out sick pay upon retirement.

Mr. Ferguson said he was prepared to walk from the table as late as 7 a.m., this morning, but the deal was saved at the last minute when the city pulled its last concession from the table. He suggested the city had withdrawn all of its significant concession demands, but would not discuss specifics or the length of the new contract.

He said pickets won't come down until after the agreement is ratified.

Looking exhausted but relieved, Mr. Ferguson said he believes his threat to walk from the table “made all the difference” to end the logjam. He thanked striking workers on the picket lines.

“I am so proud of my members for holding the lines,” he said.

As of Sunday, the city had not yet received any word on its request for court injunctions against delay tactics on the picket line. Nor was there any word on the city's request to the Ontario Labour Relations Board to expand an essential services agreement to include more paramedics required to stay on the job during a strike.