

## **Toronto's striking workers eager to return to job**

'I'm ready to go back, like, yesterday,' member of CUPE Local 416 says

Jennifer Yang

From Tuesday's Globe and Mail Last updated on Wednesday, Jul. 29, 2009 02:51AM EDT

Robyn Tarulli hasn't seen the details of her union's tentative deal with the city, but she's already prepared to check the "yes" square on her ballot Wednesday.

"You know, whatever they give me, I'm happy," Ms. Tarulli, a single mother of two and a member of CUPE Local 79 who co-ordinates children's programs at the Frankland Community Centre. "As long as I can go back to work I'm okay."

Striking workers across the city echoed Ms. Tarulli's sentiments in interviews Wednesday, suggesting the weary rank and file are likely to vote in favour of the tentative agreements. Many also expressed faith that their leaders squeezed as much as possible from city negotiators.

"I feel like it's a done deal," said Kathy Lai, a heavy equipment operator with Toronto Water and a member of Local 416, which represents outside workers. "We're just tired."

Ms. Lai has mortgage payments to worry about and has already pleaded with her creditors for leniency.

"I don't think I would be able to afford to say no any more," Ms. Lai said. "I'm ready to go back, like, yesterday."

Ms. Lai has been picketing at the Commissioners Street Transfer Station, where striking workers exhaled a "collective sigh of relief" yesterday.

"We're very happy now," said district strike captain Randy Cooper, an employee with parks and recreation. "Everybody's got that bounce back in their step that they first had when they came out here."

Amanda Bellefontaine, who repairs roads as a labourer for transportation services, certainly has that bounce back.

After five weeks of picketing, lost paycheques, and harassment from strike-weary Torontonians, Ms. Bellefontaine was overjoyed when she heard news of the deal while watching TV during breakfast.

"I spilled my coffee all over my table," she said later while picketing at the Sunnyside Park temporary dumpsite. "I jumped right up and started screaming."

Bill Steele, a heavy machinery operator at the transfer station, also said he'll likely vote yes to the deal. He said he trusts that union president Mark Ferguson wouldn't accept a deal that included concessions to the city.

"Our president would not bring something like that back to us," he said. "I asked one of our bargaining members if Mark Ferguson upheld his word; he said I would not be disappointed."

But other strikers are hesitant to throw down their picket signs yet.

"It's not a done deal, no, far from it," said Local 416 member Marc Stamco, a city employee since 1988. "A deal's not a deal until the members vote ... it could still go no."

Mr. Stamco said he would refuse to compromise on sick days, a major bone of contention during strike negotiations, and is prepared to continue striking all summer to defend them.

Sick days are also a deal breaker for Kirk Stow, a 56-year-old watchman at Ingram transfer station.

Mr. Stow used to be a garbage loader but injured his back on the job five years ago, resulting in a chronic pain that feels like a "knife in the back."

He now needs all the sick days he can get, thanks to medical bills and the "umpteenth" doctor appointments he requires.

“I don't care how long it takes, I want a fair deal,” he said. “I'm not just going to settle for anything at this point. We've come this far.”