

Strike deal awaits vote

'Everybody has lost' in 37-day stoppage: Mayor

Allison Hanes, National Post; With Files From Polina Levina Published: Tuesday, July 28, 2009

Toronto's 37-day labour stalemate lurched toward a sudden and seemingly bitter conclusion yesterday, with the city and its two striking unions announcing tentative agreements.

While there was palpable relief on the picket lines, where 30,000 indoor and outdoor workers have gone six weeks without paycheques, there were immediate questions about what Toronto sacrificed to clinch the deal.

The contents will not be made public until after ratification. Union members vote on the deal tomorrow and city councillors vote on Friday.

Services such as garbage collection, daycare and recreation programs will resume only after ratification, meaning, in all likelihood, garbage dumps will remain in parks until the weekend or early next week.

Neither side conceded defeat in yesterday's dramatic climax of the labour stoppage that began when city workers walked out on June 22, but neither crowed victory either.

"Everybody has lost," lamented Mayor David Miller to reporters at City Hall. Ann Dembinski, president of Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 79, representing 24,000 inside workers, complained the whole episode had "soured" the city's relations with its workers.

Mark Ferguson, the president of CUPE Local 416, representing 6,000 outdoor workers, basked in the glory of announcing the first settlement after around-the-clock weekend negotiations.

He claimed the city had walked away from all the concessions it had demanded, including a plan to scrap banked sick days.

"The last concession came off the table just under an hour ago," he said just after 8:30 a. m. at the bargaining headquarters, in a Scarborough hotel.

Hours later, when Ms. Dembinski emerged from a downtown hotel where her team has been holed up, she called it a "great deal" her members would be "happy with."

The Mayor, however, insisted the preliminary contract fits "within the mandate of the employee and labour relations committee."

According to an offer he made public two weeks ago, it included wage hikes of 1% in 2009, 1% in 2010, 2% in 2011 and 3% in 2012, as well as a payout of banked sick days and the creation of a sick-leave plan.

"I have a quite different view of so-called concessions than Mr. Ferguson," Mr. Miller said. "I think when people see it they will agree, it is consistent with 2009 public-sector settlements and it met the city's bargaining goals, not just to be



Aaron Lynett / National Post

After 35 days, a deal was reached Monday morning to end the strike by Toronto's garbage collectors and other outside workers.

fair to our workers, but to run the city affordably and to run it effectively and efficiently. Those were our goals and we achieved them."

City councillors, who will likely get a glimpse of the contract at a Friday ratification meeting, said they will be watching closely to see what the striking unions got.

"If the city caved on the sick bank, there's going to be hell to pay from the voters," said Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong (Don Valley East).

Councillor Karen Stintz said she will be looking to see if the settlement lives up to the Mayor's billing of affordability -- in particular whether the city held the line on capping wage hikes this year and resolving the \$140-million liability posed by the banked sick time.

Councillor Doug Holyday (Etobicoke Centre) suggested it would be astonishing if the deal forged doesn't address those two critical issues.

"The CUPE president ... is going to claim victory no matter what," said Mr. Holyday, a member of the employee and labour relations committee, which set the city's negotiating parameters. "To do anything else would be sheer folly for him. And as far as the Mayor, if we gave away all the concessions and didn't get what we wanted out of this strike and it was all for naught, it would be tantamount to him jumping off a cliff."

Mr. Holyday is also seeking to move a motion at Friday's special council meeting to prevent the city from paying out any overtime to returning employees to clean up the mess left in the wake of the strike.

"It just doesn't make sense at all to put a method in place for these people to make back the money that they lost when they were on strike," he said. "If they chose to go on strike and lose their pay, that's up to them."

In Windsor, workers resuming their duties after a 101-day labour disruption agreed to such a provision in their settlement, but Mr. Miller refused to divulge yesterday whether any such understanding exists for Toronto's unions --or whether he might support such a measure.

The Mayor thanked Torontonians yesterday for their patience and poise during the strike, and asked their cooperation for a few more days as the city unveils plans to gradually ramp-up cancelled services.

City manager Joe Pennachetti explained not all service can resume at once, because garbage trucks and works vehicles require servicing and daycare centres need to be stocked with food.

"We need to rely on some additional patience and understanding in the coming days," Mr. Pennachetti said. "We will work as quickly as possible to resume full service to residents and businesses."