

Mayor talks tough to striking unions

Voicing impatience with slow pace of talks, Miller vows to crack down on picketers breaking law and hurting city's 'most vulnerable'

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Using tough words as the city strike nears the one-month mark, Toronto Mayor David Miller vowed to “pursue every legal remedy” to allow residents, as well as strikers returning to work, to cross picket lines without harassment.

“There are a number of instances of pickets not complying with the law,” he told a news conference yesterday, including an incident when strikers barred fellow union members who were trying to go back to work at city welfare offices.

With the offices operating at reduced levels using non-union staff, the delays “are illegal, and are hurting the most vulnerable people,” the mayor charged.

Earlier in the day, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty demonstrated outside the mayor's office at City Hall, demanding help for poor families on welfare who are eligible for extra subsidies for special diets, but cannot get them because of strike-related delays.

Since the strike began June 22, the city has won two court injunctions, and the mayor vowed more, as needed.

Meanwhile, commenting for the first time on the city's request that the Ontario Ministry of Health probe why Toronto paramedics took more than half an hour to respond to a 911 call for a man who later died, Mr. Miller said he welcomes the investigation.

“I am concerned what happened might possibly indicate weaknesses in the system well beyond the stresses brought about by a strike,” he said,

As for talks with Locals 79 and 416 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the mayor expressed impatience. “I am extremely frustrated at the very slow pace of negotiations,” he said.

Repeatedly describing the strike as unnecessary, he said an offer to the unions last week, and made public last Friday, is “fair and reasonable.” (The city has proposed a wage increase of 7.2 per cent compounded over four years and a short-term disability plan to replace a system of banked sick days).

“There needs to be real urgency shown,” he said.

Next week, striking workers will lose their second pay cheque since the dispute started, with 695 employees asking to return to work so far, the city said.

Union leaders quickly snapped back, blaming the city for foot-dragging.

In a statement, CUPE Local 416 president Mark Ferguson blamed the city for provoking a strike the union tried to avoid.

“But it did happen because the city waited until we were three weeks into the strike to table an offer that gave us something to work with,” he said. “If that offer had been tabled before the strike deadline, we may not have had to strike.”

CUPE Local 79 spokesman Robert Lamoureux was also unhappy. “We are also frustrated by the pace of talks and frustrated to see no deal there that we know our members can accept.”

As for possible health issues at the city's 23 temporary garbage dumps, Medical Officer of Health David McKeown said they are inspected daily and “we have not seen any significant rodent infestation.”

The 23 sites are about 40- to 50-per-cent full, with 19 sprayed Thursday night.