

CITY LOSING WAR OF NERVES

Union allowed to stop members from crossing line

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Toronto city manager Joe Pennachetti, seeking to get some wind in his sails after having had a rough go of it since the strike began on June 22, proudly announced this week that 615 CUPE members have applied to cross the picket line.

But how many of these 615 are actually working? Yesterday 10 of these workers, whom the city has returned to its payroll, lay in the grass or sat in folding chairs on Reading Court in Etobicoke, chatting and eating Timbits. One woman, shaded by two umbrellas, got halfway through Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows.

"We're just reporting for work," she said. "We're just trying to make our money."

Across the street, 35 members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees sat guarding the doors of the office, Etobicoke North Social Services at 220 Attwell Dr., not far from Pearson airport.

When the workers who wish to cross the picket line arrive for their shift at 8:30 a. m., the strikers form a human chain around the city building to keep them out. Others bang plastic tambourines and hand-clappers, and yell insults such as "traitor!" and "scabalina!"

It's not just here. As I reported yesterday, 17 CUPE members who want to return to work at another social services office, in Scarborough, have also been forced to wait outside by strikers.

Meanwhile, the City of Toronto, which has thousands of clients dependent on welfare cheques, has not lifted a finger to try to get staff across the picket line.

"That's ridiculous," said Councillor Doug Holyday (Etobicoke Centre). "No one has the right to bar them from their place of employment. The city should get an injunction. The pickets shouldn't be allowed to break the law. We've just been too lenient with them."

No kidding. One man, who has worked 20 years as a social services caseworker, got in the first day he reported here (not his usual workplace) but has not made it in since.

"I wake up every morning stressed out that I have to come and put up with this nonsense," he said. "They [city officials] told us inside that if we felt intimidated and didn't want to cross the line to not cross the line and to just sit it out here all day. I want to work."

The city does not appear to have a plan to deal with the strikers' blockades.

"The majority of staff who have applied to go back to work have returned," Lisa Tjoeng, a spokeswoman for the city, wrote in an email. "However at some sites, on some days, there are issues and the city is looking into each situation to determine the best course of action. It is possible the city may reassign some staff if necessary. With regards to your question to what authority does the unions have, it's probably best that you speak to the unions directly."

I did, in fact, put that question to the strikers.

"When you get hired by the city you are in the union," Benjamin, a picket captain, told me outside the social services office in Scarborough yesterday. "Those employees are members of the union. We say, 'Look, you are violating our contract with you.' We can hold them now here."

The city's ability to weather a long strike rests with Mr. Pennachetti's ability to keep city doors open and win the war of nerves with the union.

So far, he has caved to the more determined unions at every turn. The city cancelled farmers' markets in city

squares, only restoring them when farmers protested. They annulled a city council meeting. They allow strikers to hold up for hours the cars of residents seeking to drop off their trash at waste transfer stations. And now this.

Yesterday, outside the Etobicoke office, Michelle Nichols, a striking co-ordinator in Revenue Services, was playing dominoes with other strikers on a card table in the shade of a pine tree, and keeping one watchful eye on those across the street who want to go to work. "We can't allow them to go in and get paid," she said. "They're going to cross the picket line and then get the same benefits that we sat on the outside for?"

Then she reminded me of the next deadlines to pay my property taxes, Aug. 1 and Sept. 1, and warned, "They'll charge 1.5% interest if you're late."

We can depend on Mr. Pennachetti for that.