

'No' vote overwhelming, Windsor strike goes on

Trevor Wilhelm, Windsor Star Published: Thursday, July 16, 2009

WINDSOR, Ont. -- The long and bitter strike of municipal employees will continue after CUPE members voted overwhelmingly on Thursday against the city's latest contract offer.

"It was an incredible vote, better than I could have ever hoped for. It was a clear resounding no," said CUPE Local 543 president Jean Fox, who represents inside workers.

"It's in the mayor and council's court. They're going to have to determine what they're going to do, because our members are strong after 14 weeks. They're determined, and council is going to have to resolve this issue if they want this membership back to work."

Union leaders called the vote results "resounding" but refused to reveal the actual results and wouldn't say why they were keeping it a secret. They did say about 1,150 members voted on Thursday afternoon. Mayor Eddie Francis said he would call a city council meeting for Friday to discuss the city's next steps.

The city's nearly 1,800 inside and outside workers have been on strike for three months. The city's desire to axe post-retirement benefits for new hires has been the main issue from day one.

The rejected city offer included a lump sum payment of \$1,300 to full-time employees and \$650 to part-timers. The four-year deal also offered pay increases of one per cent in the first year, 1.5 percent in year two, 1.8 percent in year three and two per cent in the final year.

It did not include post-retirement benefits.

"Our membership spoke very, very strongly against not having some type of post-retirement benefit there," said Local 82 president Jim Wood, who represents outside workers. "We brought back what city council has decided our membership should see. We showed it to them and they told us once again, post-retirement benefits is the issue."

Mr. Francis, calling the city offer "more than fair" and reflective of current economic woes, said Thursday's vote was a disappointment.

"Absolutely we are disappointed," he said. "We wanted our workers back, we needed our workers back, we wanted to get our city running again. But at the end of the day there is a process. They have a legitimate right to strike and they are on strike. It is regrettable we are not announcing the end of that strike today."