

Angry strikers block Pride parade cleanup

Workers say city went back on deal not to hire private contractors

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Angry striking municipal workers say the city reneged on a deal to not hire private contractors for the Pride parade cleanup, which they delayed for hours last night by forming a human blockade around the company's heavy machinery.



More than a dozen city blocks remained littered with Pride parade condoms, candy and beaded necklaces well into the evening after the workers blocked four sweepers and three dump trucks owned by Centennial Sweeping of North York. The machines and drivers had been contracted by the city to help clean up the parade's aftermath at a cost of about \$80-90 per hour, per truck, beginning at noon.

About a hundred non-union and management staff, most of them on foot carrying brooms and bins, and some trucks operated by city staff, were allowed to continue, but the delays kept Yonge Street closed from Bloor Street south to Carlton Street for most of the evening.

The labour drama and continuing walkout by the city's 24,000 indoor and outdoor workers played out behind the scenes of yesterday's parade, which drew thousands to the downtown core for the annual spectacle of flesh, leather, dancing and Lady Gaga blasted from tarp-covered speakers on floats.

Mother Nature brought her own water gun to the event, subduing the crowds with persistent rain showers that didn't let up until the moment the parade began at 2 p.m., when a posse of motorcycle-riding lesbians roared around the corner of Bloor and Yonge Streets. They were followed by 160 boisterous groups representing all ages, professions and sexual orientations, from gay teachers to queer police officers, drag queens to grandparents.

"I come from a really redneck area," said John Teeple, 62, of Washago, Ont., who nursed a cup of Tim Hortons and a cigar under his umbrella. "So this is a breath of fresh air."

Out of sight of the crowds were picketing municipal workers, who surrounded front-end loaders, dump trucks and street vacuums at the parade's staging area on Rosedale Valley Road. Later, they formed a human blockade around seven private trucks on Carroll Street.

Tracey Sandilands, executive director of Pride Toronto, said the city told her only non-union and management staff would be involved. That understanding was the basis of an agreement signed by her organization and the Canadian Union of Public Employees Ontario, which promised not to picket the signature summer event.

"I don't exactly know what happened," she said. "We left it in the hands of the city and we're still doing so."

"We only found out today [Sunday] that the agreement was not honoured," said Mark Ferguson, president of CUPE local 416, which represents 6,200 outdoor workers.

City spokesman Kevin Sack said the city always hires some private help after major events.

"To clean up after a parade of a million people, it's obvious some cleaning staff will be required," he said. "If the Pride parade wasn't happening, the city would not have to be hiring contracted staff to clean up from it. And because the union supports Pride and Pride supports the union, it shouldn't be an issue for the union."

City spokesman Rob Andrusevich added that the city had telegraphed its intention to hire private contractors at a

news conference last week.

Meanwhile, the labour dispute also threatened to leave the parade without coverage by paramedics and ambulances after Glenn Fontaine, chairman of the Toronto EMS union local, threatened to withdraw services if city negotiators didn't address their issues. The city sought and won an order late Saturday from the Ontario Labour Relations Board compelling 78 ambulances to be available on standby as an essential service.

Mr. Fontaine's threat was not endorsed by CUPE or Mr. Ferguson, who also happens to be a paramedic. "There's a great deal of frustration on the bargaining committee," explained Mr. Ferguson, who stressed he alone speaks for his members. "He [Mr. Fontaine] was caught in a situation where he made some unfortunate remarks to the media."

Mr. Ferguson said the city has refused to entertain union proposals on giving paramedics regular advanced life-support training, increased staffing levels and a modified work program for injured paramedics that would involve them in community-based medicine.