

## Labour talks bogged down on sick days

City complains union bargaining in bad faith

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The sticking point in negotiations between the City of Toronto and its two main civic unions is a plan to reform a sick-day policy that allows workers to bank 18 days a year throughout their career and cash out prior to retirement.

The policy represents a \$186-million unfunded liability for the city, and it is an issue the auditor-general has identified as in need of remedy.

The city has presented a proposal to Canadian Union of Public Employees Locals 79 and 416 to institute a short-term disability program instead.

Both unions, representing some 24,000 inside and outside workers, are calling it a "major concession" of a right their members have earned. They both reject the proposal.

But Local 79's refusal to entertain the arguments of city negotiators at the bargaining table has ground talks with 18,000 indoor workers to a halt.

The city revealed yesterday that it filed a formal complaint with the Ontario Labour Relations Board against Local 79 on Wednesday for bargaining in bad faith, but the union now said it filed a complaint against the city first.

On Monday, the unions requested what is called a no-board report from a provincial conciliator, which, once issued, would start the clock ticking on a 17-day countdown to legal strike position.

The last time there was a work stoppage by civic unions was in 2002, when garbage piled up in the streets on the eve of a visit by Pope John Paul II.

Contracts for both unions expired at the end of 2008 -- and this is the first time both indoor and outdoor workers could walk off the job simultaneously.

No one would speculate yesterday on the odds of a strike by the end of the month. Both sides insist they are still committed to a negotiated settlement, but tempers began to fray as the day wore on -- and wages haven't even been discussed yet.

Ann Dembinski, president of Local 79 representing inside workers, described the city's decision to reveal its formal complaint about bad-faith bargaining as "shameful" and "retaliatory."

Kevin Sack, Toronto's director of communications, said reforms to the sick-leave policy are among many terms the city is striving to reach as part of a negotiated settlement that is fair to workers, affordable to taxpayers and flexible for managers.

"The illness and injury plan that protects employees is a very important one to the city of Toronto. We will not bargain publicly, but it's a very important matter and it's one that the unions themselves have identified as an issue for them," Mr. Sack said.

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