

City workers could face strike or lockout June 22



Labour Ministry issues deadline requested by unions

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The city's garbage collectors and other unionized workers could be in a legal strike position as of midnight on June 22, as a clock begins ticking on labour talks that both sides acknowledge have gone sour.

Yesterday, the city announced that the Ontario Ministry of Labour had issued what are known as "no board" reports at the request of each of the city's two unions, the Canadian Union of Public Employees Locals 79 and 416. The orders set a 17-day deadline, making a strike or a lockout legal at 12:01 a.m. on June 22.



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Talks between the city and Local 416, which represents 6,000 garbage workers and parks maintenance staff, among other workers, continue, with bargaining scheduled for today.

But talks with Local 79, which represents 18,000 daycare and other “inside workers,” remain broken off, city spokesman Kevin Sack confirmed.

“We’re ready to talk at any time,” Mr. Sack said yesterday.

The city, facing a budget crunch next year as the economic downturn causes welfare cases to rise, issued a statement yesterday saying it wants to reach negotiated settlements with its workers that “must be fair to employees” but also “reflect the financial ability of the city and are affordable to Torontonians.”

The city also said that in the event of a labour disruption, it has a contingency plan to ensure key services can continue, and would announce those plans if a strike looms. (Transit workers, police and the fire department have separate contracts and are not involved in the current dispute.)

The bad atmosphere around the talks became clear this week, when the presidents of both unions held a joint news conference, decrying what they said were city requests for concessions on sick leave and job security.

At the Thursday news conference, Local 416 president Mark Ferguson raised the spectre of the 16-day strike in 2002 which saw garbage pile up in city streets and in the parks in advance of a papal visit.

“It’s an attack on our rights as workers and sends a signal that the city wants to return to the bitter climate that led to the strike in 2002,” he told reporters.

Negotiations between the city and CUPE Local 79 have deteriorated to the point that each side filed complaints of bad-faith bargaining to the Ontario Labour Relations Board.

Local 79 president Ann Dembinski said this week that her members are furious over the city proposal to modify sick-leave benefits, and that her union had filed a complaint over that issue to the labour board. Talks, she said, had broken off over the issue as well.

On Thursday, the city filed its own complaint to the labour board, which says that the union refused to listen to a full explanation of the proposal on sick leave.

Both sides have said they still want to reach a negotiated settlement to replace contracts that expired on Dec. 31.