

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/toronto/miller-warns-unions-as-strike-deadline-looms/article1177850/>

Miller warns unions as strike deadline looms



Garbage collectors, other city workers could walk off job in 10 days; ‘A strike is very possible as things stand now,’ union boss says

Jennifer Lewington Toronto city hall bureau chief

Toronto — From Friday's Globe and Mail, Tuesday, Jun. 16, 2009 09:40PM EDT

With a strike deadline by garbage and other workers only 10 days away, Mayor David Miller Thursday warned union leaders that they have to take into account the troubled economy and the city's strained finances as negotiations drag on.

“A strike is bad for everyone. It is extremely bad for the employees and it is bad for the people of Toronto,” Mr. Miller said.

“But we need the workers and their representatives to understand the very difficult financial situation we have at the moment,” he said as he headed into the employee and labour relations committee he heads for a closed-door update.

The mayor said he still hopes a negotiated deal can avert a strike before June 22 – a view shared by Mark Ferguson, president of Local 416, and his counterpart, Ann Dembinski, who heads Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 79 representing about 18,000 inside workers.

Still, Mr. Ferguson said that the city's demands for concessions on job security, layoffs, hiring and changes in sick leave could force the unions' hand.

“A strike is very possible as things stand now,” Mr. Ferguson, who represents 6,000 outside workers, told a news conference yesterday.

He argued that the “voluminous” list of city demands for concessions “has nothing to do with cost savings” and more to do with the employer's wish to exert its control over the workplace.

He said there has been little movement from last week, even with the setting of a strike deadline of 12:01 a.m. June 22.

“The lack of progress only brings us that much closer to June 22,” he warned.

But he made it clear that a walkout is not yet inevitable.

“If things remain unchanged, then the decision on June 22 will be very easy,” he said.

Neither the city nor Local 416 have exchanged wage proposals, which typically come at the end of negotiations. The status of talks between the city and Local 79 is less clear, because they agreed to a media blackout after returning to the bargaining table on Monday.

Included in the city's request for concessions is a proposed change in sick leave policy.

In 2008, to trim costs, the city switched its non-union employees to a short-term disability program that prevents them from accumulating sick days and using them in future years.

Richard Majkot, executive director of the City of Toronto Administrative, Professional, Supervisory Association, which represents the city's non-unionized employees, said that despite initial resistance from his members to the new sick leave policy, "I haven't heard a lot of negative comments about it recently."

Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong (Ward 34, Don Valley East), who attended the same private briefing as the mayor, said the unions need to temper their expectations.

"The union should really have a hard think about what the rest of the city is going through," said Mr. Minnan-Wong, who declined to discuss the update. "People are losing their jobs and getting laid off and they are not getting raises."