

Toronto strike locked in political stalemate



Ontario Premier won't intervene in the strike by city's municipal workers as long as the two sides are at the bargaining table talking to each other

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Toronto residents face another steamy day without pools or garbage collection as the key players in a four-day strike by municipal workers remain locked in a political stalemate the Ontario Premier refuses to end — for now.

Dalton McGuinty, who has made no move to end an 11-week-long city workers' strike in Windsor, said he won't intervene in the Toronto dispute as long as the two sides are at the bargaining table.

The Premier said he does not plan on forcing an end to the strike by having his government introduce back-to-work legislation — a move that would involve calling back the legislature from its summer recess.

“I will be inconvenienced, as will many here in the City of Toronto,” Mr. McGuinty told reporters Wednesday. “But I think it's important that we just hold our fire and allow the two sides to do what needs doing.”

The Premier's words were little comfort to residents who endured the first extreme heat alert of the year without garbage collection or city-run swimming pools. Water quality at local beaches is no longer being tested by Toronto Public Health, forcing residents to swim at their own risk.

“ We knew it was not going to be a popular strike. ”— Local 79 president Ann Dembinski

Parts of Toronto will look and smell different beginning this afternoon, when the city announces 19 new temporary dumps for residential waste.

Canadian Union of Public Employees local 416 president Mark Ferguson, who represents 6,200 outdoor workers, said there was some “relatively minor” movement at the bargaining table Wednesday, but that the two sides are still far apart.

Among other developments:

- 132 employees have asked to return to work since the walkout began Monday, confirmed city

spokesman Kevin Sack. He declined to give specifics, but said at least one person was back on the job;

- 59 tickets for illegal dumping have been issued to residents for dropping trash outside designated transfer stations;
- all city-run Canada Day events and permits have been cancelled.

“We knew it was not going to be a popular strike,” said Local 79 president Ann Dembinski, who represents about 18,000 indoor workers. “We’re asking the public to be understanding.”

The unions want a wage deal in line with earlier settlements in the 3-per-cent-a-year range for Toronto police, firefighters and transit workers. They also want to keep a sick-leave plan that allows workers to accumulate and cash out up to six months of sick pay upon retirement.



*Strikers allowed people to drop off garbage at the Bermondsey Transfer Station in Toronto.
Fred Lum / The Globe and Mail*

The city, facing a \$250-million unfunded liability, wants a short-term disability program instead that has no carry-over provisions.

CUPE Ontario president Sid Ryan said the union won't give up the sick-leave benefit unless there's something better on the table to replace it.

For various reasons, all the players find themselves boxed in, some by factors beyond their control. The city cites the sharp economic downturn as one reason it needs a negotiated deal that is “affordable” to taxpayers. CUPE negotiators cannot be seen to capitulate quickly on a deal that could make their members worse off than other workers with the city.

While the province could respond to a request for back-to-work legislation, it is unlikely to end a work stoppage that only began Monday.

A few hundred striking workers staged a noisy rally at city hall yesterday under a blistering sun. Representatives from a host of other unions showed up to voice their support, including CUPE's national president Paul Moist, Canadian Auto Workers national president Ken Lewenza, and the heads of Toronto's police, fire and transit unions.