

Toronto city workers on strike



Residents are without garbage collection, daycare and a wide range of other services. 'The city is putting the knife to us,' CUPE Local 79 President Ann Dembinski says.

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Toronto's municipal workers' strike hit hard and fast for residents of all ages Monday, from the mother in Weston forced to bring her toddler to work, to the senior locked out of her local golf course, to a 17-year-old lifeguard whose summer job is up in the air.

"It just sucks that choices some people make affect us all," said Stephanie Plateo, 17, a recent high school graduate who was to begin her summer job as a lifeguard at Etobicoke's Olympium swimming pool on Thursday.

Ms. Plateo said she was counting on the job for spending money as she gears up for her first year at George Brown College. It's a particularly bad time financially for the family: Her mother was laid off a few weeks ago after 28 years at Bell Canada; her father has seen his work as a self-employed construction project manager reduced to three days a week because of the recession.

"I was really relying on this job for the summer," said the younger Plateo, one of about two dozen young lifeguards whose work at the pool is on hold after Toronto's 24,000 unionized indoor and outdoor workers walked off the job just after midnight Monday.

The job action by locals 79 and 416 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees came just a few minutes after a 12.01 a.m. strike deadline, with city and union negotiators unable to seal a deal on five separate collective agreements.

"I didn't realize how widespread it is. I just figured it was about garbage," said Julia Mercy, 42, whose

aerobics class was cancelled along with all other programs at the city's Memorial Pool and Health Club.

"I think it's a terrible thing that seniors can't get out and exercise," added Sue Shriner, a regular at the city run Scarlett Woods golf course, who gave her age as "over 65."

"I chase young men at the recreation centres. That's really the only thing that keeps me alive," Ms. Shriner said with a wink.

The strike is a significant hardship for parents with children in the city's 57 daycare centre. Denise, the mother of a 22-month-old boy, scrambled early yesterday to make other arrangements after she learned the Trimbee Infant Child Care Centre in Weston was closed.

The young mother was forced to take her child to work.

How has the strike affected you?

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In addition to the child care dilemma, Toronto residents are also without garbage collection and a wide range of other services.

"We have no other recourse but to call a strike," said CUPE Local 79 President Ann Dembinski, who speaks for 18,000 inside workers.

Local 416 President Mark Ferguson said the city has not backed away from a series of concessions on sick days and job security.

"It's been their [the city's] intent to put us out on strike all along," he said.

He asked for patience from the public. "It may be an unpopular fight but it is a necessary fight," he said.

Early Monday, pickets gathered outside Toronto city hall, and at waste transfer stations, where residents trying to drop off their trash discovered they couldn't do so. Two transfer stations will be open around the clock and five will be open 12 hours a day if the strike drags on for more than a week, the city has said. The labour action at Nathan Philips Square prompted the city to cancel the raising of the Pride Week flag, originally scheduled for Monday.

The strike caused minor problems for the Toronto islands' 700-plus residents, most of whom commute each weekday to the mainland on a city-run ferry service. The shutdown meant turning to an alternative, cruise operator Harbour Tours, operating from its base at the foot of York Street.

A one-way ticket on a 50-passenger power boat (a one-time school bus) costs \$6.50, the same as the regular ferry. During the morning and afternoon rush hour, the ad hoc taxi leaves approximately every 30 minutes, with hourly departures during the rest of the day and the evening. The service runs until 11 p.m. and is available only for island residents and their guests.

Because of space restrictions, bicycles and shopping carts were not being allowed aboard.

The inconvenience may not have been huge, but sympathy for the strikers was scant. "Having lived in Europe I understand strikes but from what I understand it's a little outrageous," said Mark Banas, a 39-year-old software designer waiting to make a trip from Queen's Quay to Algonquin Island where his son Charlie, almost 3, attends a Montessori school. "A lot of people are losing their jobs but these (strikers) are asking for a lot."

Stepping off the old boat, Freya Godard, a 50-ish Wards Island resident, concurred. "I haven't a lot of sympathy, times are hard and their benefits are more than most people have," she said.

Photographer Sean Tamblay, 37, who has been through this before, was less sure. "It's a complex issue and I don't know exactly where I stand," he said. "These are tough economic times."

Representatives of Local 416 and the city bargained through the night. Talks between the city and Local 79 are expected to resume today.

The city workers' strike is the first in seven years in Toronto and is expected to cause widespread disruption _ with the most visible and smelly impact from the loss of curbside garbage collection for homeowners in most parts of the city. However, residents in Etobicoke and multi-residential buildings _ accounting for about 600,000 of the city's one million households – will continue to have their trash collected by private haulers under contract to the city.

This time around, residents have garbage pick-up every two weeks instead of weekly as in 2002. During the strike, people are being asked to double bag their garbage and include in it what usually goes into the weekly organic green bin collection.

As well, the city will close its 57 city-run child-care centres, recreation programs and swimming pools.

For Toronto Island residents, including scores of commuters who make the short daily trip to the mainland, the shutdown of ferry service meant turning to an alternative. The gap is being filled by cruise operator Harbour Tours from its base at the foot of York Street. A one-way ticket on a 50-passenger power boat (a onetime school bus) costs \$6.50, the same as the regular ferry. The ad hoc taxi leaves approximately every 30 minutes until about 10:30 a.m., when the trips become hourly. The service is available only for island residents and their guests.

A statement from the city says police, fire, TTC and long term care homes & services (homes for the aged) will not be affected by a labour disruption. Emergency calls for ambulance/paramedic services will continue as usual. Non-emergency and low priority calls may be affected.

The water supply and sewage treatment systems will continue to function, the statement says.

Mayor David Miller said the city is prepared to negotiate at any time but added that the workers have to realize the city isn't in the same financial position that it was last year, and they won't get the same contract as other City of Toronto workers.

"The city is facing enormous budget challenges in 2009 and 2010, and the cost of providing services must be balanced with the revenues the city has to pay the bills," he said at a 1 a.m. press conference, shortly after the union announced the strike. "The world has changed; the city has extremely serious budget challenges. One needs only to look at our welfare rolls to understand that."

'Disappointed that no agreement reached'

Read Toronto Mayor David Miller's full statement in response to the strike

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Mr. Miller refused to speculate on whether arbitrators might be asked to step in, and said he won't speak to specific objections - such as reductions in sick leave allowances - raised by union spokespeople to the concessions demanded by the city's latest offer.

"I'm not going to comment on any particular issue. It's not appropriate at this present time."

The mayor insisted a negotiated settlement "not only can be reached but must be reached."

He said he has no plans to step into negotiations himself.

"My role is not to be at the bargaining table; never has been, in any of these labour of negotiations. For a

variety of reasons it doesn't work."

He also refused to speculate on under what circumstances he might call for provincial mediators to arbitrate a settlement.

"I'm focused right now on getting our employees back to work. ... There are rules about [provincial arbitration] and from my perspective it's far too early to be speaking about that. What we need to do is get the parties back to the bargaining table . . . and reach agreement."

Preparing for a garbage strike

If a strike goes ahead, curbside garbage and recycling collection in Toronto, Scarborough, North York and East York will stop.



24-HOUR DROP-OFF POINTS

1 **Ingram Transfer Station**
50 Ingram Dr.
(Keele St. and Eglinton Ave. W. area)

2 **Bermondsey Transfer Station**
188 Bermondsey Rd.
(Eglinton Ave. E. and Victoria Park Ave. area)

7 A.M. - 7 P.M. DROP-OFF POINTS

3 **Commissioners Street Transfer Station**
400 Commissioners St.
(Lake Shore Blvd. E. and Logan Ave. area)

4 **Disco Transfer Station**
120 Disco Rd.
(Dixon Rd. and Carlingview Dr. area)

5 **Dufferin Transfer Station**
35 Vanley Cr.
(Chesswood Dr. and Sheppard Ave. W. area)

6 **Victoria Park Transfer Station**
3350 Victoria Park Ave.
(Victoria Park Ave. and Finch Ave. E. area)

7 **Scarborough Transfer Station**
1 Transfer Pl.
(Markham Rd. and Sheppard Ave. E. area)

GARBAGE MUST BE DOUBLE-BAGGED WHEN DROPPED OFF. A \$100-PER-TONNE TIP FEE WILL BE CHARGED FOR COMMERCIAL WASTE. RESIDENTS IN APARTMENT BUILDINGS AND ETOBICOKE WILL BE SPARED BECAUSE THEIR GARBAGE COLLECTION IS PERFORMED BY PRIVATE CONTRACTORS.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

In public statements last week, the mayor urged the unions to consider the financial pressure on the city's \$8.7-billion operating budget, especially the impact of higher welfare costs in a recession.

In separate news conferences yesterday afternoon, the presidents of the two union locals gave equally

gloomy assessments of the talks, sticking firm to the legal strike date.

Ms. Dembinski accused the city of "stubborn unwillingness" to offer a wage deal in line with earlier settlements in the 3-per-cent-a-year range for Toronto police, firefighters and transit workers.

"The city is putting the knife to us," Ms. Dembinski said. "They're trying to rip huge things out of the collective agreement."

She said her union and the city were not "remotely close" on the city's call to switch employees to a short-term disability plan. It would replace the current program that provides 18 days of sick leave a year, with workers able to bank them over time and cash out the value at retirement to a maximum of six months.

Equally downbeat was [Mark Ferguson](#), president of Local 416 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents about 6,000 outside workers, including garbage collectors.

"Only the City of Toronto appears to not know what a deadline means," he said, urging city negotiators to "wake up and let's get this deal done."

For the unions, seniority rights, wages and protection of the existing sick-day plan are top issues. Mr. Ferguson said that one city proposal would have older workers laid off before younger workers with less seniority.

Without commenting directly on proposals, city director of communications Kevin Sack said any new agreements must "contain the changes that are necessary to permit the Toronto public service to deliver the best possible and affordable services."

For the city, the proposed conversion of the sick-day plan to a short-term disability program, as has happened in other municipalities, "is a big issue and it is an important issue," according to Mr. Sack.

In theory, the city faces a \$250-million unfunded liability with the sick-leave program, an estimate union officials discount as a worst-case scenario of maximum claims.

Over the weekend, to the surprise of union officials who had expected round-the-clock bargaining, city officials wrapped up around midnight on both Friday and Saturday.

With the assistance of several provincial mediators, the city and its two unions aim to replace contracts that expired Dec. 31, with both sides saying they want to reach a negotiated deal.