

Long strike feared

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Make serious progress on a deal by this weekend, or settle in for a long, bitter strike.

That's the outlook from both the City of Toronto and Canadian Union of Public Employees, whose 30,000 city workers walked off the job at midnight Monday.

Nobody has threatened to walk away from the table, but both sides say this weekend could be a make-or-break point.

And the risk of a prolonged strike escalated yesterday when Premier Dalton McGuinty discouraged the idea of legislating an end to it.

As the walkout enters its fourth day today, the city will announce 19 new drop-off locations for residential garbage, mostly arena and parking lots in parks. In 2002, 12 locations were used.

Hot, humid weather is forecast through the weekend and garbage is piling up, but the city's medical officer of health says it's not a concern yet.

"A well-managed temporary garbage site, even if it's a large one, does not necessarily create a health hazard," Dr. David McKeown said yesterday. "It may be unattractive and cause odours, but this will not cause human disease.

Public health managers are monitoring conditions and will issue cleanup orders if warranted.

Meanwhile, city officials say 132 of the 30,000 striking workers have applied to return to work.

City spokesman Kevin Sack said the individuals must apply to do so, and the city decides if there's work for them to do. He would say how many are back on the job.

CUPE spokesperson Pat Daley said that, in any strike, some people will cross picket lines. "You still have more than 29,000 people who haven't crossed," Daley said.

At a rally in Nathan Phillips Square yesterday, striker Doug Cargill, a paramedic, was in no mood to back down.

Cargill said he's unhappy with many things, including a city proposal that he said would force paramedics to work longer shifts.

"You're getting beaten down," he said. "I think (the city) sees the current economic situation as their chance to claw back benefits we've accumulated over the years. In fact, they're just trying to get more work for less money."

While talks continue, a union insider said the pace is glacial – with much of the talk focused on small issues and not the main stumbling blocks.

Mark Ferguson, president of CUPE Local 416, which represents 6,200 outside workers, said there's been some movement at the table, but it's been "relatively minor."

And there's no telling what wild cards might come.

For example, there are hints the city may seek an injunction limiting picketing to prevent undue delays for people trying to drop off garbage at transfer stations.

While an injunction could ease delays, it could sour the atmosphere at the bargaining table.

Back-to-work legislation would take the onus off the city and union to settle their differences, but McGuinty said that's not in his plans. "I think it's important that we just hold our fire and allow the two sides to do what needs doing," he told reporters.

Windsor has been without garbage collection since mid-April because of a municipal strike, so it's unlikely McGuinty would bail out Toronto after only a few days.

Strike leaders insisted yesterday they want to bargain a settlement, rather than have one imposed.

Maurice Mazerolle, professor of human resources at Ryerson University, agrees that the binding arbitration that would follow legislation is not the answer.

"It does away with their responsibility and let's them off the hook," he said.

Mazerolle added most municipalities are loath to go to arbitration because they cannot plan for the eventual costs, and in this case he figures the union's chances at arbitration are better than the city's.

The city's settlements with other unions have yielded pay hikes of at least 3 per cent, so it would be hard to argue for an exception, he said.

The union says the city is demanding steep concessions on issues from sick pay to seniority rights.

With files from Donovan Vincent, Paul Moloney, Robert Benzie and Rob Ferguson