

Province won't step in

Some workers ask to return but walkout will last 'as long as it takes'

By BRYN WEESE, SUN MEDIA

Last Updated: 25th June 2009, 4:21am

Solidarity forever or solidarity be damned.

City officials confirmed yesterday 132 would-be striking workers have requested to cross the picket line and report back to work.

As labour leaders told a scorching Nathan Phillips Square rally that the municipal strike, now in its fourth day, would last "as long as it takes," Premier Dalton McGuinty said he wasn't ready to step in and end it.

While Kevin Sack, the city's senior spokesman, wouldn't say how many of the 132 would-be scabs are back on the job, he did confirm some are working again.

"It's a process (to cross the picket line)," he said. "There's 132 that have asked, and as we sort it out, it's not a number that we update every day."

Sack said workers who want to cross must fill out an application form and submit it to their managers for approval. Workers do not have to state why they want to cross the picket line, Sack added.

But for those picketers who won't cross, CUPE's Sid Ryan told a crowd of several hundred at yesterday's union rally -- staged without permission on a city stage set up for the upcoming Jazz Festival that could be cancelled -- they shouldn't be ashamed of their "modest wages" and "modest benefits.

"That's something worth fighting for," he said, noting Mayor David Miller has a direct role to play in ending the strike.

His inaction, Ryan hinted, could lead to a lengthy labour dispute like Windsor's, where city workers, including garbage collectors, have been on strike for 11 weeks.

Also in attendance at yesterday's rally was CAW president Ken Lewenza, the TTC's Bob Kinnear, and the heads of Toronto's police and firefighter unions.

Mark Ferguson, president of CUPE Local 416 that represent 6,200 outside city workers, confirmed negotiations were ongoing with the city and that some "minor" progress has been made since the strike began Monday morning.

"(But) we're still quite far away from a settlement," he added.

And despite a recent Angus Reid poll showing 81% of Torontonians want the province to legislate striking workers back to work, McGuinty said yesterday he's not prepared to do so just yet.

"I think what's really important is that we give the sides the opportunity to speak," he said, noting he would be willing to provide more mediators. "I think it's important that we just hold our fire and allow the two sides to do what needs doing ... I think we've got to give those folks some time to get it done."

Workers with the city's two biggest unions walked off the job Monday morning, closing city-run daycares and pools, and cancelling garbage collection and ferry service, among other services. The city reportedly wants to change the unions' short-term sick leave plan where workers can bank unused sick days and cash them out at retirement for up to half a year's salary.

BRYN.WEESE@SUNMEDIA.CA