

A tale of 2 strikes

Garbage begins to pile up again, 7 years after city workers last walked off job

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The evening before 24,000 Toronto civic employees walked off the job, the head of the union representing the outside workers didn't mince words.

"At 9:30 this evening, the City of Toronto tabled a proposal that we considered to be complete garbage," CUPE Local 416 president Rob Ferguson said Sunday. "It was a vicious attack on our membership, an unwarranted attack."

The issues standing in the way of a new contract include wage increases, seniority and a bitterly contested proposal by the city to change its employees' sick plan that would mean an end to workers banking days and cashing them out at retirement.

Both inside and outside workers went on strike just after midnight Monday, frustrated by six months of negotiations that they say have gone nowhere.

CUPE Local 79 president Ann Dembinski said the inside workers represented by her union were striking because they were asked to make concessions that other city workers — like police and firefighters — didn't have to make.

Toronto Mayor David Miller said the city doesn't want a strike, but couldn't accommodate the union requests because of a budget squeeze sparked by the recession.

Ferguson told reporters that he believed the city had intended to "put us out on the streets all the way along."

"The contempt that the city holds for city workers, through the proposals that are on the table, is much worse than we saw in 2002," he said, speaking of the last strike by city workers.

New playing field

Few specifics of either the city's or the unions' bargaining positions are known.

But the circumstances around the strike seven years ago were rather different than those surrounding the one that began Monday.

On June 26, 2002, the city's outside workers walked off the job, seeking better guarantees on job security. The workers said the city wanted to contract out some of their jobs to private companies.

CUPE Local 416 wanted unionized employees who had worked for the city for at least six years to be guaranteed lifetime employment. The city, in turn, offered to assure lifetime



Members of CUPE Local 416 set up a picket line outside a water treatment facility in Toronto's west end on Monday morning after members went on strike to back demands for a new contract with the city. (Lorenda Reddekopp/CBC)



Former Toronto mayor Mel Lastman, seen in this 2003 file photo, accused city employees in 2002 of wanting 'jobs for life.' (Kevin Frayer/Canadian Press)

employment to workers with 10 years of seniority if their jobs were contracted out. The offer would not have applied to new employees.

That proposal did not sit well with the union, and the difference of opinion proved to be highly contentious — talks between the two sides broke off immediately.

In the case of the latest strike, by contrast, both union and city officials saw fit to at least sit down at the bargaining table on Monday hours after the strike had begun. Mayor David Miller has said the city has no intention of privatizing garbage collection or any of the other services affected by the strike.

'Jobs for life'

After the initial impasse in 2002, talks resumed on July 1 and the city and union went back and forth with proposals. As the standoff continued, the rhetoric on both sides rose along with the temperature.

Then-mayor Mel Lastman and his allies on council frequently used the term "jobs for life" when describing the demands of the unions.

Three days after the outside workers went on strike, Lastman lashed out angrily saying the city had offered all it could.

"You can shake your head all you want, but you're wrong and what you're doing is evil," he said.

CUPE representative Judy Darcy responded angrily to the attack, calling the mayor's remarks "outrageous."

"The role that the mayor should be playing is trying to lower the temperature, not raise the temperature and making inflammatory comments like that does not help," Darcy said at the time.

Meanwhile, garbage collected on sidewalks and festered in huge piles in city parks and tennis courts. Public pools, ferry services and outdoor recreation services were also affected.

The city was dealt another blow on July 4, 2002, when 15,000 inside workers walked off the job because they felt their concerns about job security had not been addressed.

That walkout opened rifts on council. Some city councillors, including the current leader of the federal NDP, Jack Layton, criticized Lastman for pursuing "a privatization agenda."

Provincial intervention required

As it became increasingly clear that the city and the unions wouldn't be able to reach an agreement on their own, the provincial government under Conservative premier Ernie Eves intervened.

On July 11, the provincial government tabled back-to-work legislation compelling workers to return to their jobs.

The union eventually won a ruling on job security during arbitration.

Premier Dalton McGuinty has kept a low profile on the possibility of back-to-work legislation for the striking city workers. But the province hasn't intervened in the strike going on in Windsor, Ont., where inside and outside workers have been on strike since April.