

City employees back to work on Friday?

Unions appear ready to end strike at last, but city council vote looms on horizon

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Toronto's 30,000 striking civic workers are set to return to work at last tomorrow after outside workers reached a deal late last night on back-to-work protocols.

The agreement came two confusing and chaotic days after locals 416 and 79 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees had said they had the basis for new contracts.

Local 79, representing 24,000 inside workers, ratified its contract yesterday and appears ready to return to work once the 6,000 outside workers, represented by Local 416, dismantle their picket lines.

It now appears that will happen very soon. Local 416 president Mark Ferguson announced last night his members will hold a ratification vote today and, if passed as expected, workers would resume regular shifts as of midnight.

But there is another potential hitch. City council is to meet tomorrow morning to examine the deals, but its approval is by no means certain. If council rejected the agreements, the strike presumably would resume.

The two sides supposedly had a deal to end the strike early Monday, but trash continued to pile up in parks because the city and the outside workers still hadn't finalized the wording of an agreement.

More importantly, they had not yet agreed on a back-to-work protocol, which included the thorny question of whether outside contractors would be allowed to help clean up temporary garbage dumpsites and the mess on city streets.

The two sides negotiated throughout yesterday. Ferguson said the deal they reached will allow city workers exclusively to work on the cleanup until Sunday night. If more cleanup work remains, the city will be allowed to hire private contractors to help.

With the city's controversial sick bank program still in the tentative deal, Mayor David Miller faces the prospect that, after all the agonizing negotiations, council could conceivably vote the agreements down.

Reporters quizzed the mayor yesterday afternoon about a provision in the tentative deal that gives current city employees the option to keep banking pay for unused sick time, or take an immediate cash payout. New employees will not have the option of banking unused sick days.

The mayor defended the deal, repeatedly saying sick bank program had been "eliminated." When pressed by reporters who noted employees would be able to continue to accumulate sick days, he eventually said the program was being "phased out."



CARLOS OSORIO/TORONTO STAR

Union members of CUPE Local 79 wait in line to cast their ballots for or against the deal at the Sheraton Centre in Toronto on July 29, 2009.

He added that the provision almost certainly would have been retained in any agreement reached with an arbitrator if back-to-work legislation had been imposed.

The mayor depicted the pact on the sick bank as a victory for Torontonians, saying it wasn't until the city's public offer of July 10 that CUPE agreed to negotiate the issue.

"This is a very strong achievement," Miller said.

"Our goal was to constrain that liability. We've done that. We've achieved our bargaining goal."

He said the buyout provision would save the city money, but did not provide a specific estimate.

The agreement with CUPE, Miller said, includes wage increases of 1.75 per cent in the first year, 2 per cent in the second and 2.25 per cent in the third.

When he heard what was included in the tentative agreement, Councillor David Shiner (Ward 24, Willowdale) criticized the deal, calling it unfair to taxpayers.

"I'm against the plan. I think it's way too rich of a plan and taxpayers can't afford this," Shiner told the *Star*.

Councillor John Parker (Ward 26, Don Valley West) said the city "capitulated" on the sick bank issue and said he doesn't see himself voting in favour of the agreement tomorrow.

"It makes me wonder what the strike was all about. I thought the city was going to the wall on this," he said.

With files from Daniel Dale