

CITY WALKOUT: DAY 34

## Could it finally be crunch time in city strike?

A surprising ultimatum raises the stakes in an increasingly desperate labour struggle, as unions representing inside and outside workers appear at odds for the first time since the strike began

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The union representing the city's outside workers has threatened to walk away from talks if a tentative agreement is not reached by midnight tomorrow.

The union representing the inside workers plans to keep talking and even says a deal is "possible" this weekend.

Mark Ferguson, president of CUPE Local 416 – which represents 6,200 outside workers, including garbage collectors – says he's frustrated with the pace of negotiations in the 34-day-old strike.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for CUPE Local 79 – which represents 24,000 mostly inside workers, including public health nurses – says they are "continuing to focus on reaching a settlement."

Yesterday's developments mark the first time since the strike began that the unions – which have so far been basically on the same page at the negotiating table – have adopted significantly different tactics.

Mayor David Miller, however, welcomed Ferguson's stance. "I have stated repeatedly over the past several weeks that the unions needed to bring a sense of urgency to the bargaining table and get on with reaching an agreement," Miller said in a statement, adding the city remains "fully prepared to bargain 24 hours a day" to reach an agreement that is fair to its civic workers and affordable to Torontonians.

"I'm a patient man, but I'm close to the end of my rope," Ferguson said, adding he has given the deadline to the city's negotiators.

However, the other striking local, 79, which represents workers such as daycare teachers, public health nurses and parks and recreation staff, was taking a conciliatory stand last night. While their president Ann Dembinski was unavailable for comment, a spokesman said there are no plans to impose a deadline of tomorrow night on the city. "We're continuing to focus on reaching a settlement," said CUPE national spokesman Robert Lamoureux.

He added that Local 79 believes it's "possible to reach a settlement this weekend." Local 79 apparently made a comprehensive offer to the city late Wednesday. It's unclear what has happened since then.

Ferguson, however, said "a vast array" of issues remain unresolved for his local, including bankable sick days and wages.



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

*Mark Ferguson, who represents 6,200 outside workers, issued a 48-hour ultimatum to the city: Settle, or the union will walk away from the table.*

"Sunday night is a firm deadline for a full settlement," he warned.

Ferguson's remarks come as striking civic workers in Windsor ratified a four-year deal, ending their 101-day strike.

His announcement about tomorrow night's deadline came as a stunning move to some.

After all, a release alerting the media about Ferguson's afternoon news conference said only that he would respond to the city's announcement yesterday that it is going to the Ontario Labour Relations Board seeking more paramedics to deal with a reduction of EMS service due to the strike.

Ferguson, a paramedic, said his ultimatum has nothing to do with the city's move.

Councillor Frances Nunziata said last night she was "very surprised and shocked" that Ferguson would impose a sudden deadline.

"Before (he) makes that comment, (Local 416) should go to their membership for a vote," she said.

"A lot of the members I've talked to say they want to go back to work ... I think that since the city made its offer (public) there are a lot of employees who are quite happy with it and want to go back.

"The union has an obligation to go back to their membership before they decide to walk away from the table," Nunziata added.

Ferguson said if the deadline passes, he'll walk away from the negotiating table and join his fellow rank-and-file union members on the picket line. "That means negotiations from our perspective will be over, there will be nothing else to negotiate, and we will ride this labour disruption through to a conclusion," Ferguson said.

When asked how long he would be prepared to wait, he said "as long as it takes to achieve a settlement."

Despite his stance, Ferguson said he's not trying to send a signal to the province that it's time for Queen's Park to bring in back-to-work legislation.

"I don't see that as being a viable option. The best collective agreements are agreements that are directly negotiated between the parties. We expect there's going to be serious negotiations that happen over the next 48 hours."