

Deal reached in city strike

Union ultimatum takes bargaining to the wire

Jul 27, 2009 08:34 AM

JASON MILLER
DONOVAN VINCENT
STAFF REPORTERS

Negotiators for the city and its two striking unions have reached an agreement after more than a month of a civic workers strike.

Mark Ferguson, president of Local 416 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, made the announcement at about 8:30 a.m. but did not provide further details.

The first real promising sign came at midnight when city negotiators asked for a one-hour extension, which the union side quickly granted.

At about the same time, several union members were spotted at the talks, smiling and saying "Deadlines work."

The deadline was set Friday by Mark Ferguson, president of Local 416 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents some 6,200 striking outside workers, including garbage collectors.

"I'm a patient man, but I'm close to the end of my rope," Ferguson said Friday, when he told city negotiators he'd walk away from the bargaining table if a deal wasn't reached within 48 hours.

It seems to have worked.

Both Toronto Mayor David Miller and leaders of CUPE Local 79, which represents 24,000 mostly inside workers, said Ferguson's deadline added urgency and focus to the talks.

One sign that the talks might be heading for a positive resolution came yesterday evening, when some members of Local 79 said they received calls from their union heads alerting them to a potential settlement before the midnight deadline.

As the deadline neared, union spokesperson Pat Daley said the talks have now reached the most critical moment, as both sides were busy attempting to iron out a solution for the "tougher issues."

Both sides, she said, are making a serious effort, talking back and forth to reach what she called a "serious deadline."

Daley noted that both local 79 and 416 were working together in the search for a solution that has left Toronto with mountains of garbage piled in residential neighbourhoods and caused cancellation of a large number of city services and summer programs for holidaying schoolchildren.



Jason Miller/Toronto Star

CUPE Local 416 president Mark Ferguson returns to bargaining after making a brief statement to the media about the current state of the talks to end the municipal workers' strike. (July 27, 2009)

"There are different tactics being used but they are still coordinating back and forth," Daley said about the negotiations between both unions and the city, speaking just two hours before the deadline.

Daley said it was a positive move on Ferguson's part to set the midnight deadline, which adds urgency and focus to the talks, but suggested she "wouldn't count on it" spurring an early settlement.

Local 79 made a comprehensive offer to the city late Wednesday to settle the strike, but there's been no movement since.

CUPE national spokesperson Robert Lamoureux, speaking on Friday, said he believed it was "possible to reach a settlement this weekend." Earlier in the strike it seemed 416 was close to a settlement with the city, and 79 was holding out.

Local 79 president Ann Dembinski had voiced frustration with the city's contract offer, saying thousands of part-timers in her union wouldn't be covered by the city's proposed sick leave plan.

She also accused the mayor and the city of adopting a negotiating position that was hostile to women because many of her members are female.

Her union also represents public health nurses.

But then came Friday's ultimatum from Ferguson.

While Ferguson threatened to walk away, Local 79 took a more conciliatory stance, promising to continue talks.

City councillor Frances Nunziata predicted Friday that Ferguson's stance would upset his striking members, and she urged that before Local 416 walked away from bargaining it should bring the city's latest offer to its membership for a vote.