

Is Mark Ferguson the most hated man in Toronto?

You may be surprised to learn the obscure head of our outside workers union is a principled family guy who spends his spare time immersed in Eastern philosophy. And you'll be shocked to hear what the man he replaced as union head has to say about him

Jul 18, 2009 04:30 AM

[Comments on this story](#) (25)

Leslie Scrivener
Feature writer

A glimpse of Mark Ferguson's incoming emails. They are of a type:

"I hate you with all my heart."

"You are a terrorist."

"I hope karma pays you a visit and you lose your job."

Ferguson, the 40-year-old president of Canadian Union of Public Employees Local 416, which, with inside workers from Local 79, has been on strike since June 22, does reply. Sometimes pedantically:

"Your sense of cause and effect are seriously skewed. Perhaps you might redirect your anger towards the banks, financiers and Wall Street rather than cannibalizing gains made by other working people. Reframe your question from, 'I don't have it, so they shouldn't either,' to 'they have it – why don't I?' It's not a race to the bottom, sir."

Ferguson says this strike is not about public sympathy – not likely with summer camps cancelled, building permits on hold, daycares closed, garbage fouling parks and arena parking lots – though surely it would help his cause. He is unmoved, despite opinion polls and outraged citizens who have marched in anti-strike demonstrations, organized neighbourhood cleanups and protested pesticide use. University students are out of work and may not make tuition. The seemingly arbitrary 15-minute wait at dumps seems mean-spirited and designed to infuriate patient Torontonians.

"We all want to be liked, but I don't see the strike as a popularity contest..." says Ferguson. "As long as I can be judged by those who know and love me that I'm doing the right thing, it doesn't matter to me what the average person thinks."

The nasty public sentiment is balanced by supportive emails from union members urging him to stay the course. He's not well known in the ranks, though he worked for CUPE for 18 years before, as vice-president, he assumed leadership last fall after the bitter departure of president Brian Cochrane. The rancour between the two is as foul as something rotting in one of the city's temporary garbage dumps.

Pickets at Coronation Park, requesting anonymity, describe Ferguson as well-spoken and cool – the benefit of 11



TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

CUPE Local 416 president Mark Ferguson first made his mark fighting for his own parental leave. (July 15, 2009)

years as a paramedic. But they don't have a whole lot more to say.

"I don't know the man," notes one.

"I consider him fair, so far," says another.

"He's an upstanding man with our interests at heart," observes a third.

What they do *not* know about the Brampton-raised father of two is that he is forfeiting his pay, which is about \$100,000 a year, during the strike. Nor have they seen his quirky bedside reading: *How to See Yourself As You Really Are*, by the Dalai Lama; *The Akashic Experience – Science and the Cosmic Memory Field*; *Serpent of Light beyond 2012 – The Movement of the Earth's Kundalini and the Rise of the Female Light 1949-2013*; and *The Doctrine of Awakening – The Attainment of Self-Mastery According to the Earliest Buddhist Texts*.

"That's who I am," he says. "I'm wanting to look for answers."

"We're looking at a different, modern, new-age type of union leader," says Aron Sperling, a paramedic and shop steward who's known Ferguson since college days. "He doesn't seek confrontation; he seeks fairness."

Mark Ferguson has been living in the Delta Toronto East Hotel for five weeks with the usual late nights, early mornings, four or five hours sleep a night and missing his family that go with bargaining. Tall and lightly greying, he wears rimless glasses, a long-sleeved striped shirt, dark trousers and lace-up shoes – the look of a likeable but demanding high school chemistry teacher.

Ferguson was interested in the sciences and told he was in the 98th percentile of his class, but he dropped out of Brock University after the first year. "I wasn't enjoying structured education," he recalls. "Helping others in a time of need was where it was for me."

As a student, he worked as a lifeguard and taught lifesaving, which fit in with his belief that he had to do something useful with his life. He's the elder of two sons in a close family. His mother, Jan, was a nurse, and his father, Grant, a Peel region school principal and superintendent – he emails them every other day or so during the strike. "They were extremely gracious, loving parents. I owe everything I am to them."

Grant introduced an innovative program that saved Gordon Graydon Memorial Secondary School in Mississauga, which was slated to be closed, turning it into an international business and technology school. "Our openness to a lot of things opened (Mark's) mind," says Grant. "It was most important that he have a set of principles that guided who he was and what he wanted."

Mark recalls that his parents told him: "You can be anything you want, anything you set your mind to.' God's honest truth, I live by that – through focused intent and awareness and living in the moment, I have been able to achieve incredible things."

You might notice the phrase "living in the moment." He meditates, though not in any formal discipline. "It's more a clearing of the mind. I do deep breathing exercises to get rid of internal chaos."

Ferguson's interest in metaphysics runs deep. If he was not a union leader, he says he'd go back to school and study "consciousness." What's that? "I believe all people are interconnected in ways we never know."

At Centennial College he trained to be a paramedic, working in Brampton before joining the then Toronto Ambulance Service in 1991. He was ambitious, striving to gain higher qualifications. "I am an extremely determined person," he says. "If I set my mind to something it will happen."

He met his wife, Cathy, an emergency nurse who teaches at York University and Seneca College, on an emergency call. "She was one of the most beautiful women I've ever met and extremely intelligent."

Cathy says Ferguson is a calm person. "He doesn't lose it around here. I want people to know that he is truly trying to protect people."

He made his mark in the union when their first daughter was born. It was 2000, and the federal government had increased maternity benefits to a year and allowed for parental leave, so either parent could take time to be with a new baby. Still, the city denied him leave, so he filed a grievance, went to arbitration and won the benefit, not only

for himself but all members of Local 416. Local 79 soon followed, as did police and firefighters. "I thought, oh my God, how great this is – the incredible amount of power and opportunity for standing up for your rights. I didn't have to succumb to being told 'no.'"

After that victory Cochrane, then president, invited him to run on his slate as chair of the outside division.

"He was intelligent, naïve and articulate," says Cochrane, who had been a community centre caretaker. But he says that over time, he had misgivings. "There are people who are highly intelligent but don't have a soul for the job... You have to have an understanding of what the rank and file actually feel."

Ferguson became Cochrane's protégé. "He and I were extremely close," says Ferguson, who still speaks admiringly of Cochrane's contributions to the union. "I learned a great deal, and I've never faced off nor sat beside a negotiator any tougher than he was."

Cochrane retired last year when he turned 55. He hoped to take his pension and continue as union president through the current bargaining. But the CUPE national office said that violated the union's constitution. Ferguson and others floated ways to keep Cochrane employed at CUPE, including as chief negotiator and spokesperson, but in the end it didn't work.

Cochrane believes that Ferguson, powered by an ego he describes as "immense," aspired to be union president.

"That's absolutely false," counters Ferguson. "I never aspired to presidency. I was pulled in kicking and screaming. My learning curve was to take the best of what I saw, but I learned what tactics I'd never employ. I'm not a bully. I'm not authoritarian."

Cochrane says his style of leadership was needed at the time to keep a tight rein on a fractious union after city amalgamation. "Or it was going to blow apart. You don't run a local union with the politics that have gone on without taking control."

Last year, public library workers started mobilizing to break away from 416 and form their own local (they voted to do so overwhelmingly in March). Cochrane concedes that he thought it was in the best interests of the library workers to leave. It was alleged that he urged them to split so he could work for them. Not true, says Cochrane.

"I felt a huge sense of betrayal," says Ferguson, who wanted the better educated, mostly female library work force to stay in the union. ("They bring a dimension to our union I sorely miss, a yin-yang.")

"I'd gone to Earth's end to keep him employed."

Last November, Ferguson sent a bitterly sarcastic email to Cochrane accusing him of placing "our membership in jeopardy at such a critical time ... we are right smack dab in the middle of an open period for six collective agreements and in the midst of a world economic crisis of gargantuan proportion.

"F--- you. You threatened me, you deceived me, you used me, and all only to justify your own selfish ends. I could give a s--- whether or not you think I'm up to the task. I have a job to do."

Ferguson says such a nasty email was out of character for him. In fact, many who have worked with him praise his cooler style. "When he makes a decision and it's the right decision, he doesn't go out there and take credit for it, the way others do in his position," says Gina Gignac, national representative for CUPE.

"You see the training that someone who has done Emergency Medical Services work, who helps people in the most difficult times in their lives," says John Cartwright, president of the Toronto and York Region Labour Council. "A very focused sense of resolve, somebody who's steady under fire."

Ferguson is a zealous defender of the role of unions. He points to wage settlements in the past year or so that have given Toronto police, firefighters, parking authority workers and Community Housing employees wage increases of about 3 per cent and no loss of benefits.

"In tough economic times unions show their mettle. It's disingenuous for the city to use the recession as an excuse to strip away promises made over decades... Working people drive the economy, and we're being villainized because we have decent jobs and work 40 hours a week. Companies have exploited workers, moved overseas and

abandoned working people."

As for Mayor David Miller, cast as a supporter of union rights, Ferguson says, "He's a decent man, well-intentioned, but in this dispute he's drunk the Kool-Aid and follows advice he didn't need to."

Ferguson denies there's a schism forming among the union membership. "All reports back from the lines suggest they are extremely united and strong." *The Star* has reported that some pickets were not following union instructions to keep cars waiting 15 minutes before they could unload garbage bags. It isn't an edict, he says. "Our fight is not with the public, but with City Hall. We've given flexibility to picket captains on what protocol works best."

He says he's frustrated that people in Toronto are "stirred up over one polarizing issue" – banking sick days, which by his assessment would cost the city \$1.4 million annually.

He disputes the estimated \$140 million payout – that amount would have to be paid only if every eligible worker retired at the same time. Yet no amount of explaining that the sick days are similar to a severance package for long-serving, dedicated city employees in the golden years has so far moved public opinion.

Ferguson says the less polarizing issues of seniority, health and safety and professional development are also critical. One proposal on the table could see the end of an advanced life-support training program for paramedics – the very one that enticed him to work in Toronto.

Another proposal might allow senior workers to be laid off before more junior workers. He sees this as a continuing attack on older workers. "I don't see it as my job to sell out baby boomers." For guidance in matters of attack and retreat, there's another book that Ferguson has been reading, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu. It's the oldest military treatise in the world, but has more recently been used as a guide for competing successfully in business. Or, maybe, negotiating worthy settlements. It's not by his bedside, but with him in the bargaining room.