

Let's get to work, Mayor says

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Facing intense pressure to get the city moving again, Mayor David Miller announced late last night that striking civic workers can get back on the job as soon as they ratify their new collective agreements.

Miller's about-face — after earlier saying that workers wouldn't return until after city council approved the deals — hands back to the union the hot-button question of just when residents will get garbage pickup and other services.

Early this morning, union leaders were sending mixed signals.

CUPE Local 79, representing 24,000 inside workers, demanded shortly before Miller's 11:15 p.m. statement that staff go back as soon as they ratify their deal, expected to happen late today.

But CUPE 416, with 6,000 outside workers, wavered on when its members will vote and said it doesn't want them back until council approves the hard-fought contract that capped a 35-day strike.

In Miller's statement, he said: "The city has stated to both union locals that the city will welcome all staff back as quickly and efficiently as possible as part of the orderly resumption of the city's services."

Earlier in the day, he had insisted he would not call a council meeting until after the CUPE members had voted in favour of their contracts, then expected late tomorrow. The requirement for 24 hours' notice means council wouldn't have met before Friday morning and, with Monday being a holiday, it was almost certain city workers wouldn't be back until Tuesday.

Miller had been steadfast despite calls for a quicker move back to normal operations. But pressure was building from some union workers and right-wing members of council.

Yesterday on the picket lines, CUPE members voiced frustration that going back to work Tuesday meant the loss of nearly a week's pay since Monday's tentative deals were reached.

Last night, Ann Dembinski, head of CUPE Local 79, held a news conference demanding that inside workers be allowed to go back to their jobs tomorrow.

"Our members are anxious to get back to work so the people of Toronto can once again benefit from the services we provide," she said.

At the very least, council should vote on the settlement today, Dembinski said.

But, soon after Miller's statement was released, Pat Daley, spokesperson for Local 416, told the Star: "Our position has been that we don't go back until the city ratifies (but) it's not over until our parties have ratified."

Amid rumours all evening that Local 416 was considering some kind of delay in its members' vote on the tentative deal, expected today, Daley said: "I can't answer that question."

The city is still expected to release a back-to-work plan today.



JIM RANKIN/TORONTO STAR

Elliott Davis, right, gives fellow picket Bob O'Brien a hug outside the Commissioners transfer station after learning Local 416 had reached a tentative contract with the city. (July 27, 2009)

Public health worker Eva Sin, who staffs an AIDS and sexual health hotline, says she is anxious to return to her job.

"I don't know how processes work. We're just saying: we're ready."

Councillor Case Ootes and a coalition of councillors calling themselves the Responsible Government Group met Miller yesterday asking him to speed up the approval process — and to give councillors details about the tentative settlement right away.

The group wants council to vote on the settlement tomorrow. Ootes said councillors will get the information Friday morning, but added that is not enough time to properly digest the offer.

The tentative deal gives members of the Canadian Union of Public Employees in Locals 416 and 79 wage increases totalling 6 per cent over three years.

A compromise was also worked out on bankable sick days. According to sources, the city is freezing the bank, but giving workers an option to take immediate partial payment on their accumulated sick days, or keep what is now in their bank and cash out at retirement.