

Some strikers back at work

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Hundreds of unionized City of Toronto workers have left the picket line and returned to work, but don't ask what they're doing, or where.

Officials will say only that, as of Wednesday, 824 workers had applied to the city to return to work and 597 have been deployed. There are about 30,000 city workers on strike.

City officials are worried pickets will block them from getting in to work, as happened at the North Etobicoke welfare office last week.

"During a strike, you want to be able to place staff in areas you've determined are the most critical," said city spokesman Kevin Sack.

"And you also want to ensure that staff who are returning to work have access to their place of employment."

The standoff in North Etobicoke prompted the city to warn the Canadian Union of Public Employees to back off, or face "the strongest possible action."

Mayor David Miller has repeatedly said city legal staff have standing orders to seek court injunctions to stop picket line clashes.

The city provided a hint that returning workers are having an impact, when it was announced on Tuesday that building permits sitting in the pipeline would start being issued.

Incoming workers freed up non-union managers in the buildings department to return to their regular jobs and resume processing of building permits.

Coun. Doug Holyday said he supports union workers coming back but understands concerns they may have about being ostracized by co-workers once the strike is over.

"The union does I guess imply that these people will be outsiders if they break the picket lines," Holyday said. "I think people who are going to spend the rest of their working lives here are probably concerned about their future for those reasons."

Those concerns are well founded, said CUPE spokesperson Pat Daley.

"The polite word for them is strike-breakers," Daley said. "It really hurts people – when they're out on the picket line fighting for improvements – to see people who are also going to benefit cross the line and collect a paycheque.

"It's something that their co-workers don't forget."

Daley added that without supporting details, the union is leery of the city's tally of the numbers of union members back at work.



ISteve Russell/Toronto Star

Mark Ferguson, president of Toronto Civic Employees Union Local 416 talks to his pickets at Commissioners Road transfer Station of during the first day of the city strike. (June 22, 2009)

"We don't even know where that number comes from," she said. "We've asked for a list and the city hasn't responded. Local 416 has asked, and there's been no reply from the city, so we can't say that we even know those numbers are right."