

## Strikers told to halt 'offensive' activity at welfare offices

City threatens 'strongest possible action' unless picketers stop delaying non-unionized staff at social assistance sites

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SOCIAL JUSTICE REPORTER

Homeless for more than a year and penniless since she lost her wallet this week, Cynthia Cronkhite scraped together \$2.75 for bus fare to travel to the north Etobicoke welfare office for help.

The office near Pearson airport is one of just three still operating since civic workers went on strike June 22. The remaining 11 offices are closed, forcing people such as Cronkhite, who lives near the city's Queensway office, to travel long distances for service.

At least once during the first week of the strike the north Etobicoke office was closed by picketers who stopped management staff from entering until late in the afternoon. Last week, about a dozen unionized staff who tried to go back to work clashed with their striking colleagues on the picket line, resulting in calls to police. Two security guards are now posted at the main entrance and two private investigators have been capturing everything on camera, although those workers remain on the sidelines.

Picketers allowed the centre's management staff to enter with no delays yesterday, but forced dozens of other non-unionized staff deployed to the site to wait about five minutes each.

But any delays for non-union staff at welfare offices are unacceptable, said city spokesman Kevin Sack, who visited the site with city manager Joe Pennachetti on Thursday.

"They are providing – or trying to provide – service to the city's most vulnerable people," Sack said. "It's really important that the union understands that this kind of work is important and should take place in an atmosphere where people who are going through a tough time don't have to go through a tougher time to access the kind of assistance that they need.

"By unnecessarily delaying both the staff that work there – and the clients – it poses an undue and unfair hardship. It's just not right. We hope that it stops," Sack said, adding that the city is considering all options, including a court injunction.

Mayor David Miller said yesterday that Pennachetti wrote a letter seeking the cooperation of CUPE Local 79 president Ann Dembinski and Local 416 president Mark Ferguson. The letter says the city will "take the strongest possible action" unless there is an immediate end to picket line activity that is harmful to welfare recipients.



TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

*At the north Etobicoke welfare office July 17, 2009, picketers let managers in without delay but forced dozens of other non-unionized staff to wait before entering the building.*

In addition to being made to wait, "Toronto's most vulnerable residents have also been asked to identify themselves to picketers and to prove that they are recipients of social service benefits; this is illegal, offensive, inappropriate and cannot be permitted to continue."

While Miller said officials have standing orders to apply for court injunctions, he stressed the city must gather evidence to show that people are being illegally delayed from entering city premises. "As you can understand, it's a bit complicated to get the evidence. If a Torontonian is stopped, for example, we need an affidavit from that person."

On Thursday afternoon, Cronkhite entered the office with ease and left with a cheque for \$300 – to cover basic and emergency needs.

"The strikers were very kind and polite," she said. And inside, management staff running the office were "fantastic ... very polite."

However, strikebound welfare offices are equipped to hand out emergency aid only and can't offer extras such as job counselling or TTC tickets. As a result, Cronkhite flagged down a taxi to take her to the nearest cheque-cashing outlet so she could get home.

"It's a big pain," she said as she hopped into a cab, which she said she'd pay when she cashes her cheque. "But what am I supposed to do?"

Strikers say they are operating an orderly picket and not harassing welfare recipients.

"We're letting them go in freely. They have nothing to do with this. Our fight isn't with them," said picket captain Radha Ghagare.

But across the street, unionized workers who want to cross the picket line and return to work are feeling the heat. "They intimidate us," said one. "They are taking our pictures, following us to our cars, taking down our licence plates and even following us home."

*With files from Paul Moloney and Vanessa Lu*