

## City strike talks down to the wire

With only hours to go until union's deadline, there's 'a real urgency' at the bargaining table

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Toronto's 35-day municipal strike faces a bargaining deadline of midnight this evening – while hope builds that tomorrow Toronto will look a little more like Windsor.

As talks head into the final hours before the deadline, Stuart Green, a spokesman for Mayor David Miller, welcomed the sense of urgency evoked by the deadline.

"(CUPE Local 416) basically threatened if a settlement isn't reached by midnight Sunday they will walk away from the table. So that puts the urgency on the talks that the mayor has always talked about. He's always talked about there needed to be a real urgency at the table. If it means 48 hours of steady negotiating, that's what we'll do," Green said late Friday as negotiators headed into the crucial weekend round of talks.

Mark Ferguson, president of Local 416, which represents 6,200 outside workers, had issued the ultimatum earlier on Friday.

While negotiators pound away at the table, city staff are putting the final touches on a plan to get the city back to normal quickly if and when a settlement is reached.

They already have a plan for clearing away the mountains of garbage rising all over the city, says city spokesman Kevin Sack, who called for continued patience.

"Bringing back 30,000 employees isn't like flicking a switch," Sack said. "It will take a period of days to return services to regular levels."

In Windsor, municipal workers are already clearing away that city's lingering mess after a 101-day strike ended on Friday.

Indeed, the Windsor settlement was not far from negotiators' minds in Toronto as they headed into this weekend's talks.

"It's good news that Windsor has ratified their contract. We're optimistic that we'll be able to reach a settlement as well," said Green.

Asked to predict when that might happen, Green said he'd "need a crystal ball."

CUPE's Ferguson had mixed feelings about the end of the Windsor strike.



COLIN MCCONNELL/TORONTO STAR

*Mark Ferguson, president of Local 416 of Canadian Union of Public Employees, speaks at a press conference in the Delta hotel about ongoing labour talks with the City of Toronto. (June 21, 2009)*

"We're pleased to learn that the municipal workers in Windsor have settled and that they've ended a long and bitter municipal dispute," he said.

But comparing Windsor to Toronto would be meaningless, he insisted. "As far as its application to any settlement in Toronto, we see that their settlement is irrelevant to what may happen here."

Windsor Mayor Eddie Francis expressed his support for Miller while making pancakes with his young daughters last night.

Miller was facing a "rough weekend" with the negotiations, Francis said, and he thought some encouragement was in order. "I can certainly empathize with what he's going through," he said.

A few days earlier, he had called Miller to say: "Listen, my thoughts are with you and your family."

Meanwhile Jean Fox, president of CUPE Local 543 in Windsor, sent Ferguson a text message, letting him know she supports him as the strike drags on.

Ferguson didn't reply, but Fox said if she were to speak to him today she'd say: "Stay strong, and try to get some rest."

It's a tale of two cities, of sorts. Windsor and Toronto: so very different and yet, until recently, so very much the same.

Windsor's strike ended with a four-year deal that gives workers a 6.3 per cent wage increase and a \$2,000 lump sum payment for full-time employees.

However, the contract does not include post-retirement benefits for new hires, which had been a sticking point for the union.

Asked yesterday about the Toronto union's ultimatum, Fox said, "That's the only way you're going to get someone to move."

The Windsor union employed similar tactics, which eventually led to almost 48 straight hours of negotiations.

*With files from Dale Anne Freed*