

City union vows to stand its ground

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The union representing the city's 6,200 striking outside workers has made it clear that a proposed pay freeze this year and 1 per cent hike next year won't fly, according to an email message to city councillors obtained by the *Star*.

"Local 416 is not prepared to accept a compensation scheme with zero in the first year and 1 per cent in the second," president Mark Ferguson said in the email, which was sent just hours before a closed-door session of the employee and labour relations committee yesterday.

After a 2 1/2-hour meeting, attended by nearly half of all city councillors, Mayor David Miller emerged to tell reporters that the committee voted to grant increased flexibility to the city's negotiators, though he refused to elaborate on what that meant.

He did, however, continue to talk tough, suggesting the union needed to change its attitude to end the 18-day walkout.

"The goals remain the same as when the strike started," Miller said. "The union as you know from their public statements is looking to settlements of the past. It's not the past. The world changed with the financial crisis, and it hit the city like everybody else."

Local 79, which represents 24,000 mostly inside workers such as daycare teachers, public health nurses and parks and recreation staff, walked off the job at the same time as Local 416 on June 22.

The unions have been coordinating their action, though they are bargaining separately with the city at different hotels.

The unions have pointed to the need for fairness, noting other unionized city employees have received annual pay hikes of 3 per cent, including the TTC, police and fire departments. The other stumbling block is a sick-time bank provision, where employees can save unused sick days and cash them out before retirement.

The proposed zero and 1 per cent deal is the same one given to the city's 3,900 non-union staff, who are currently filling in for unionized workers at garbage depots, sewage and water treatment plants, and in traffic court.

Politicians, though, refused to roll back a 2.42 per cent cost of living increase for themselves this year.



RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

Young people who would be working at Centreville on Toronto Island if not for the municipal workers' strike came out to Nathan Phillips Square today to protest the strike, while CUPE workers picketed nearby. (July 8, 2009)

In his email, Ferguson said the union will stand its ground.

"We are prepared for a long strike if that's what we have to do to get fair and equal treatment," he said, adding councillors should ask "hard questions about why your negotiators are wasting time and what the plan is to end this strike."

Councillor Doug Holyday said he hoped the committee vote to grant increased flexibility would spur some movement.

"If we sit there on both sides of the table, and nobody has any flexibility, and nobody moves from their position, it's like two brick walls looking at each other," he said.

Not all councillors are convinced it will do the trick.

"Given the voluminous list of outstanding issues, this could be a long strike," said Councillor Denzil Minnan-Wong. "The union needs a reality check. They have to think long and hard about what they're asking for in tough economic times – and who they're asking to pay for it."

With files from Paul Moloney