

# Toronto city workers strike against privatization

**Lee Parsons, David Walsh**  
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Negotiations resumed July 2 between the union representing 6,800 outside workers and Toronto city officials for the first time since the workers walked off the job June 28. Officials of Local 416 of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) gave the city a counterproposal to the offer they were handed in the last few minutes before the strike began. Meanwhile, garbage continues to pile up in the summer heat in parks and on street corners, ferry service to Toronto Islands has been cancelled and facilities such as summer camps and most swimming pools remain closed.

Local 416 President Brian Cochrane asserted Tuesday that the union had made “major moves on the substantial issues,” including “employment security” in its proposal. A central issue in the dispute is the city’s insistence, as it moves to privatize services, that it will provide job security only for those who have already been working 10 years. The union has been demanding that every worker be guaranteed a job, including new-hires, once he or she has worked six years.

Cochrane’s statements must be taken by the workers as a warning that the union leadership is preparing to capitulate on the key demands for job security at the heart of the struggle.

The garbage, paramedical, water treatment and parks and recreation workers have demonstrated determination to defend the principle of job security for themselves and future generations in the face of a concerted city and media campaign to turn the public against them. Mayor Mel Lastman made a demagogic appeal last week for the 100 striking workers who operate the city’s pools to come back to work for “the sake of the city’s kids.” The workers refused.

Much is being made about the fact that the strike began on the eve of the Canada Day weekend—typically the busiest holiday of the summer—and the annual Gay Pride parade. The walkout also comes in the run-up to the expected influx of 350,000 Catholics for the Pope’s visit during the World Youth Day gathering, at the end of July.

CUPE Local 79, representing 18,000 inside city workers—including public health nurses, social workers, staff

at old age homes and homeless shelters, lifeguards, ambulance dispatchers, licensing and traffic court clerks—was in a position to strike June 29, but officials postponed any action, citing the need of the city administration to concentrate on negotiations with Local 416.

This cowardly decision was a blow to those already on strike and an attack on the unity of the city workers. It demonstrates that the union leadership is opposed to the mass mobilization of the working class required to defend city workers’ jobs and economic security.

The leadership of Local 79 postponed any action at the request of Mayor Lastman. Local president Ann Dembinski commented: “We’re concerned that the swimming pools are closed, Canada Day celebrations have been cancelled and the garbage is piling up.” Such statements invite the question: what did Dembinski think would result from a strike? Would she prefer to see an ineffective walkout that left city operations untouched? Another question is raised: what should take precedence? The jobs and livelihoods of thousands of workers, or the continuation of normal trash collection and public pool hours? Any disruption and inconvenience to the general population must be laid clearly at the feet of the city officials, who have launched a business-inspired offensive against the working class of Toronto.

The city has not concealed its plans to go ahead with the privatization of services and the destruction of city workers’ jobs. The Lastman administration has adopted a plan to study contracting out jobs in four service areas. Deputy Mayor Case Ootes commented: “Council has made a clear decision that, over time, it wants to have the flexibility to look at other ways of delivering services to ensure the services provided in-house are cost-competitive. That’s why it’s important to phase out the jobs-for-life clause that exists within the past contract.” Ootes said the city’s position on this is “fixed” and non-negotiable.

WSWS reporters spoke to strikers on the picket line at the Ingram Transfer Station. Paul, a truck driver with 12 years at the site, commented: “How would you feel if you did 15

years, and then all of a sudden they go: ‘We want to end the job security. You guys have been here 17 or 18 years, and you put your guts and glory in here, and now you know what, you don’t seem to be moving too well, you look like you’re a little slower. Your back doesn’t seem to be as new as we can get with this fresh blood.’ That’s the problem, that’s the main issue. I mean, you put your sweat into it, after so many years, would you appreciate being kicked out the door?”

The policies of the provincial Tory government have put the city under increasing pressure to carry out an assault on the standards of living of municipal employees. In 1998, the Tories forced the seven municipal governments of the Toronto area to amalgamate as a cost-cutting measure aimed at rationalizing services. The squeeze on the city’s budget and the pressure to extract more from its employees has also been increased by the “downloading” of services once provided by the provincial and federal governments to the municipal level.

Although negotiations with the outside workers’ union began last February, and despite the fact that progress was made towards an agreement on wages and benefits, the city was determined to hold its ground against the workers on the issue of privatization. By all accounts, contracting these services out would not return substantial immediate savings to the municipal treasury—a clear indication that a broader political agenda directed against working people is being pursued.

Premier Ernie Eves has threatened to recall the provincial parliament to draft back-to-work legislation against the Toronto strikers. Such a measure would further damage the new premier’s increasingly labored efforts to portray himself as a more conciliatory Tory.

Likewise, opposition leader Dalton McGuinty, whose provincial Liberals, with the support of sections of the union bureaucracy, are hoping to translate hostility to the Tories into a majority in the provincial parliament, has indicated his willingness to legislate against the strike. McGuinty declared, “I think it is premature (now), because the strike is just beginning to unfold.... But at some point, if public safety became an issue, then obviously we would sense an obligation to return here.”

The provincial New Democratic Party (NDP), which preceded the current Tory government, has blamed the current regime for the strike. In fact, the social democratic NDP under Bob Rae inaugurated the privatization of public services in the early 1990s and prepared the way for the onslaught of the Tories. Current party leader Howard Hampton cynically denounced the current government, saying, “The province has overwhelmingly contributed to this.”

Wide layers of the population, far from being hostile to the city workers or their cause, identify with their opposition to privatization and view the local and provincial governments with distrust and even open hostility. In the wake of the tainted water tragedy at Walkerton, in which provincial government policies contributed to the deaths of seven people, as well as the revelations about Enron’s activities in California and similar criminal enterprises, budget cuts and privatization are increasingly discredited and opposed. The ignominious resignation of former provincial premier Mike Harris already has the Tory government in crisis.

Rod, another striker from the Ingram transfer station, told the WSWS: “As long as we’ve got public support and the garbage keeps piling up we may have a prayer in hell. That’s where we’re at now—in hell, as far as I’m concerned. We don’t have to listen to Eves. We’ve got a democratic country so far. And they can order you back to work, but you don’t have to go back to work because of your democratic rights.”

A striker, originally from Pakistan, employed at the Scarborough Arena spoke about the provincial politicians: “They secure their own jobs. They say they don’t, but you know they do. They raise their own wages whenever they want. They are millionaires and billionaires, they don’t care. In my opinion, Eves is the same thing as Mike Harris. You’re very innocent if you think Ernie Eves is something else. Same thing, same policies.”

The onset of the strike in Toronto coincided with the G-8 summit hosted with much fanfare by the Chrétien Liberal government in Alberta. The images of garbage piling up and workers walking picket lines in the country’s largest city was not the picture the Canadian ruling elite wanted to see broadcast around the world. Moreover, the walkout took place on the eve of the Canada Day holiday, the annual opportunity for the government and media to whip up chauvinism. In the city workers’ strike the reality of social and class tensions finds a limited, but concentrated expression. The servility of the CUPE leadership, however, places the struggle in danger.



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