

# Metroland, union negotiate as strike deadline approaches

By BEN DUMMETT  
the Herald

The editorial staff at the Georgetown Independent and the Acton Free Press could go on strike as early as 12:01 a.m. Friday.

That's when the staff's union - the Metroland Unit of the Southern Ontario Newspapers Guild, which has 142 members in 17 newspapers - is in a legal strike position. And 92 per cent of the union membership present at a meeting Sunday night in Toronto voted to give the union the power to call a strike if no agreement is reached by early Friday morning.

Metroland employees have been without a contract since Dec. 3, 1989.

Union and management negotiating teams are currently taking part in a "marathon mediation bargaining session" which started Tuesday morning and could run until Friday at 12:01 a.m., said the union steward for the Independent and the Free Press, Dan Ralph.

The two sides have met about a dozen times since early December and there are still about 60 items on the negotiating table, said Mr. Ralph.

"I have no idea if we'll go on strike but we've been cautioned to be ready," Mr. Ralph said in an interview Monday.

"But these things have a way of being taken care of in the eleventh hour," he added.

Brenda Biller, Metroland's director of human resources, seemed to agree with Mr. Ralph, saying, "we're far apart but that's not unusual."

The two sides settled on the first contract in 1987 after the strike deadline had passed.

Salaries is one major issue separating the two sides, said Mr. Ralph.

The union is asking for a one-year contract calling for a 35 per cent increase in a senior reporter's salary and a 24 per cent increase in a senior editor's salary.

Mr. Ralph said a senior reporter - with a minimum of four years experience - currently earns \$505 a week and the union is asking for an increase to \$681. The union also wants the weekly salary of a senior editor - one with a minimum of two years experience - to increase from \$615 to \$764.

Management is offering a three-year contract with salary increases of 5½ per cent in the first two years and 6 per cent in the third year, said Ms. Biller.

Some people have a misconception that the union wants wage parity with the Toronto Star, said Mr. Ralph. TorStar owns the Toronto Star and the Metroland chain.

Mr. Ralph says the union is asking for salaries to move closer in line with reporters working for small dailies such as the Brantford Expositor.

A senior reporter working for the Brantford Expositor earns about \$700 a week, he said.

The use of freelance reporters is the other major issue, said Steve Pecar, the chairman of the Metroland unit of the union.

He argues that instead of filling vacant reporter positions with another reporter, the company uses freelancers or students.

Freelancers aren't entitled to benefits and students work for free, said Mr. Pecar. And the com-

pany weakens the bargaining power of the union by hiring these two types of labor, said Mr. Ralph.

Mr. Pecar said the union has tried to move the talks forward but management refuses to change its position.

But Ms. Biller said this "simply isn't true." The company has suggested many changes on several of the proposals, she said. But she was unwilling to say what the proposed changes were.

"I'm not going to negotiate through the press," she said.

Mr. Pecar said Monday he didn't know if the talks this week would stall, but he did say it is up to the company to "come to us."

It's unlikely Metroland would be able to publish its newspapers in the event of a strike, said Mr. Pecar.

But Ms. Biller said the management of each newspaper would put out their publications.

Metroland newspapers in this area include the two servicing Halton Hills, the Brampton Guar-

dian, the Milton Champion, the Oakville Beaver, the Burlington Post and the Mississauga News.

Although Metroland publishes the Rockwood Review and the Erin Echo they would be unaffected by a strike. These newspapers are published by non-union people, said Mr. Ralph.

Mr. Pecar wouldn't reveal any specifics but he said the union had a strategy to prevent any of the newspapers from being published.

And if the newspapers were published they would be "scab labor" products, filled with articles on such topics as gardening, he said.

Mr. Pecar said the union has the support of the readers and advertisers of the newspapers.

"We've presented our case to the advertisers and they seem to agree that we're not getting a fair shake."

He hopes advertisers will revoke their advertising in the event of a strike.

# Leather stores charged

Acton businesses Leathertown West Warehouse and Flight-Line were once again charged under the Retail Business Holidays Act after being open this past Sunday.

The two businesses, which are divisions of the Olde Hide House, were the only two in the Region charged under the act for being open on Sunday. An April 4 court date has been scheduled in connection with the charges.

A provincial court judge in Milton decided Monday to postpone a scheduled court hearing involving the Acton businesses for being charged earlier this year under the RBHA until April 23.

Meanwhile, in an Ontario Court of Appeal case heard Monday in

Toronto, the court ruled that a Region no longer requires the Ontario Attorney General's participation to obtain a closing order for repeat offenders of the act, Halton Region's legal services commissioner Mark Meneray said in an interview Tuesday morning.

"(The decision) will allow us to act more expeditiously against business owners," who abuse the RBHA, he said.

Before the Appeal Court's decision the attorney general had to review a Region's arguments and evidence it would use to justify closing a store on Sundays before any action could be taken, explained Mr. Meneray.

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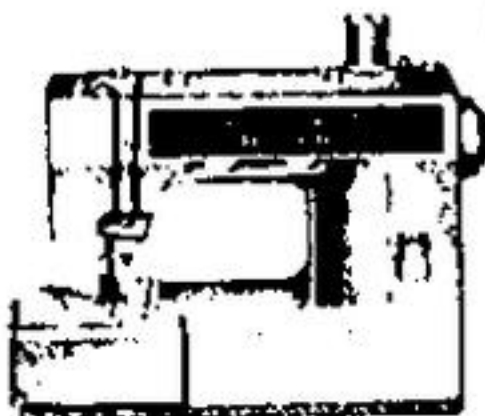
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