

Settlement nowhere in sight

Catholic teachers, board still at odds

As the labour dispute between Halton's Catholic high school teachers and their board drags into its fifth week, obstacles to an imminent resolution remain firmly entrenched.

"By no means is this anywhere near being resolved," said Joe Pece, president of the Halton Secondary Unit of the Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA).

Pece made his comments Friday morning after emergency meetings with his collective bargaining team were held to discuss the Halton Catholic District School Board's latest proposal.

Pece said teachers have offered to agree to a "fair and unfettered" arbitration process under Section 40 of the Labour Relations Act.

The board's response, which Pece received Thursday, was a "clear rejection" of the union's position, he said.

Board chair Jim Sherlock, however, says the board's offer would make way for a mediation/arbitration process that could possibly resolve every issue in dispute.

Pece says Sherlock's "spin" on the board's offer is "nowhere near" binding arbitration. Instead, he says, it places restrictions on the procedure and would limit an arbitrator's powers. In short, it does not allow for a "free and open" arbitration process, says Pece.

"This type of arbitration process simply replicates the back-to-school legislation that was imposed on Hamilton-Wentworth and Dufferin-Peel," he said. "That legislation does not apply to our situation and it is another example of Mr. Sherlock's unwillingness to reach a fair settlement to this dispute."

Sherlock sticks to the position that the latest board proposal would also lift all forms of strike sanctions engaged in by teachers since school started.

Pece maintains that the board is holding the

parents and students hostage to save face with trustees in Hamilton-Wentworth and Dufferin-Peel.

"It is clear that Mr. Sherlock does not want this to be a made-in-Halton deal," said Pece.

Pece says that while the board pleads poverty, he maintains it has the funds to pay for teachers' demands regarding workloads and staffing.

One of the great ironies of the whole situation, Pece adds, is that deals are being struck at boards that have received much less funding than Halton. He went on to characterize the board's position on this issue as an "out and out lie."

One main stumbling block in negotiations has been the requirement under Bill 160 that teachers' workloads be increased to 1,250 minutes per week. The board has interpreted this by telling secondary school teachers they must teach seven out of eight classes, instead of the current six of eight like past years.

Teachers who had been timetabled to instruct four periods in the first semester had been teaching only three and were on strike for the fourth.

On Tuesday, Halton's Catholic high school teachers resumed instructing the fourth assigned class they refused since the start of school. Department heads also returned to teaching their third assigned period—all acts of goodwill, says Pece.

At present, Halton's 375 Catholic high school teachers are still refusing to engage in any co-curricular activities at school.

Pece said teachers have not ruled out further sanctions—including striking the fourth class—if the dispute is not resolved. He did say, however, that parents will be notified well in advance of any new job actions.

Pece said that public meetings may also be held so that teachers can explain their position directly to parents.


—By Howard Mozel, special

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