

**Strike possible**

# Union threatens to shut area ambulance service

By Linda Kirby

A strike by Halton ambulance workers may be averted today, if a settlement is reached in a contract dispute between the District of Halton and Mississauga Ambulance Ltd. and its 54 bargaining unit employees.

Negotiations between the two sides are currently underway in the Toronto offices of the Ontario Ministry of Labor, following the appointment of a mediation officer, a company official said.

The meeting is the first,

since the announcement by the union officials last Wednesday of a scheduled strike beginning Tuesday, Sept. 19.

The strike deadline was declared at a press conference by the negotiating team of Local 207, Ontario Public Service Employees Union, in a move to force the company to meet the demands of the union workers.

The private company looks after both emergency and patient transfer calls in the districts of Milton, Burlington, Oakville and Mississauga.

The strike could place lives in jeopardy, admitted Hank Meyers, local president and negotiating committee chairman, but in a statement to press reporters said the union is committed to closing down the ambulance service as tightly as possible if a strike occurs.

"A lot of people are going to be upset," he said.

"No one likes to go out on strike," he told the gathering, but "if we have to go out, we'll make sure we win this one."

A contingency plan has been established by the company management in the event of a strike, confirmed Allan Duffin, operations manager.

Although Mr. Duffin would not reveal details of the plan, he stated that all emergency calls would be handled in the Halton area.

"I can assure you there will be adequate service," he said in a telephone interview.

Mr. Duffin said all calls would be handled on a priority basis, and that emphasis would be placed on emergencies.

At the press negotiating team conference, officials said they have already been assured by ambulance workers in Metro Toronto, Brampton, and Hamilton that they will not respond to ambulance calls, during the strike.

Hank Meyers added that the union is now trying to contact the Ontario Firefighters' Association to secure their support in the dispute.

Contrary to the union statement, Mr. Duffin said other ambulance companies must respond to calls.

"By law, they must respond, regardless of their location, if they are the closest."

Money is not the cause of the dispute. Driver attendants have just received a 5.4 per cent salary increase, said the president of the union.

"We realize we have been offered the maximum, and that what we were offered is all we are entitled to under the anti-inflation guidelines."

The issues are the sick leave system, the hours of work in the Burlington part of the operation and the ability of workers of equal qualifications to receive equal shifts.

According to Mr. Meyer, the ambulance company is trying to take away certain benefits.

The present sick leave system is based on the accumulation of one and a half sick days a month to a maximum of 200 hours.

While some employees are quick to accuse the company of not paying for accumulated hours, they forget they started with a new company in 1974, which absorbed their credit, he stated.

reporters, "they just want what is theirs."

The strike is also a move to force the company to put another car on the road in Burlington, continued union officials.

"It's certainly needed," said Mr. Meyer. "Service in Burlington has been reduced from three cars on 24-car duty in 1973 to the present situation where there are two cars on duty during the day and only one at night."

According to Peter Slees, union public relations officer, Milton was left without an ambulance for two and a half hours one night recently, when ambulances were needed elsewhere.

Milton has only one car for a 24-hour-a-day service.

According to the company, there are occasions when an ambulance is pulled from one area to assist another district, "but we will always move another vehicle from someplace else into the borderline area," said Mr. Duffin.

He added it is not unusual for a vehicle to be pulled from its area to assist other ambulance services, "but there is always a stand-by vehicle."

Finally, employees are fighting to retain a long-standing privilege—the ability to swap shifts between workers of equal qualification.

The company is now proposing to take the privilege away, said union officials.

Despite preparations for the strike on the part of both sides, the union and company management remain optimistic that the strike may be averted.

"We are still hopeful the union will discuss the issues again," said Mr. Duffin, adding "the union may have an alternative."

"We are optimistic about it—we have always been able to come to a solution."

"I think reason will come to bear," said Mr. Meyer, who blamed the ministry of health for the reduction of ambulance service.

"The employees cannot continue to assume the responsibility while the government and employer do not provide suitable pay and benefits," he stated.

"We acknowledge that we are placing lives in jeopardy," he continued, "but the ministry has been trading lives for dollars, for the last three years."

Ontario ambulance companies are 100 per cent funded by the provincial government.

—Be sure to fill in the fluoride opinion poll on Pg. 1 of today's Champion.

## Ambulance boss defends company's position

Charges of unfair sick leave benefits and inadequate ambulance service in Burlington by employees of a Halton ambulance company are being challenged by management officials of the private company.

Union members of Local 207, Ontario Public Service Employees never mentioned the issue of providing Burlington with an additional ambulance, Allan Duffin, operations manager with the District of Halton and Mississauga Ambulance Ltd., told The Champion in an interview.

The subject was one of three key complaints stated by the union negotiating team during a press conference called to announce a strike deadline of Tuesday, Sept. 16.

Reporters were told that Burlington was in need of an additional ambulance to assist one other car during the night shift.

"That point was never raised in union negotiations," said Mr. Duffin, adding that he discovered the complaint through news stories in the local media.

According to the company spokesman, concern was expressed by union members over Burlington shift hours.

At present Burlington works an 11-hour day shift and a 14-hour night shift.

Other divisions work a 10-hour day shift with an 14-hour night shift.

"We said fine, we will change the hours to be more uniform, but they will work less hours and therefore have less wages," said Mr. Duffin.

Union members did not favor lower pay, he stated, despite their desire for a change in the schedule.

The crux of the labor dispute is a proposed new sick leave benefit plan.

The new system proposes six days of sick leave per year, or 60 working hours, whichever is greater. Employees would then receive 70 per cent of their weekly earnings.

Payment of the weekly indemnity program would take effect on the first day in the case of an accident and on the fourth day in a situation of illness.

The union does not like the plan, however, because employees fear one or more illnesses a year could wipe out their sick time and pay.

Mr. Duffin pointed out the company also footed the bill for all OHIP expenses, pays for a life insurance policy, provides a dental benefit program, a drug medical plan and a pension plan.

The present sick leave system is based on the accumulation of one and a half

days a month to a maximum of 200 hours.

With the adoption of the new scheme, the company would settle sick credits by setting aside 60 hours, to be used by the employee for sick leave. Half of the remaining number of hours would then be paid at the current hourly rate for that person, he said, and the company would then consider themselves square with the employee.

Union officials have submitted the plan, claiming that the company is only interested in paying for half of an accumulated sick leave.

Mr. Duffin pointed out that 44 of the current 54 employees began with the company in 1974, with a backlog of sick leave credits.

The company inherited over 4,000 hours of sick time, he said when it amalgamated several small ambulance companies.

"Is it really fair for us to have to pay for hours accrued by another company?" he questioned.

According to Mr. Duffin, not all companies follow similar procedures and absorb sick leave time credits.

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## Strike halts GO bus service

Milton and area commuters who depend on GO Bus service to get to work in Toronto found themselves stranded Monday.

The effects of a TTC strike are being felt throughout the area as subway trains, city buses and GO bus service are at a standstill.

The GO bus service, affecting hundreds of commuters daily, is run by Gray Coach Lines, a subsidiary of the TTC, and will be suspended for the duration of

the strike. Transit officials recommend Milton riders make their way to the Oakville GO train station, where they can board a train for Toronto.

"We have expanded all trains and are using every car possible," said a GO official, who warns that station parking lots will be strained to capacity.

The only GO buses that will be running will be those operated by Travel regular

scheduled routes: Uxbridge-Toronto, Uxbridge-Pickering, York Mills-Yorkdale, Markham-York Mills-Yorkdale and Richmond Hill-Finch.

### Cyclist, 7

## Boy hit by car

A seven-year-old Mississauga boy is recovering at Sick Children's Hospital in Toronto after being struck by a vehicle on Lower Base Line Saturday afternoon.

William Allen, of 2053 Burnhamthorpe Rd. in Mississauga was on his bicycle on the north side of Lower Base Line when he attempted to cross to the south side, said Halton Regional Police.

The grade one pupil was knocked from his bike by a car driven by 19-year-old Paul Richard Course of Eighth Line, Hornby. Mr. Course was travelling in the eastbound lane, when the boy

suddenly attempted the crossing, according to police.

Allen was rushed to Oakville-Trafalgar Hospital and later transferred to the Toronto hospital.

—There are rumors of anti-fluoride petitions being circulated in Milton. A handy opinion poll on Pg. 1 of today's Champion will supplement the expression of public opinion. Be sure to fill it in.

—Last call: Get your favorite photos entered by this Friday in The Champion's fall fair photo contest. \$25 in prizes is being offered to winners.

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