

Local ambulance officers want parity with Metro

By LISA TALLYN

The 85 full-time union employees of the District of Halton/Mississauga Ambulance Service, voted unanimously last Wednesday not to accept a contract offer from management which would increase wages by 7.6 per cent over the next two years.

The contract proposal was presented and turned down by the membership of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, Local 20. The offer was made one week after talks broke down between negotiating teams.

An application for conciliation has been made but no date has been set.

Gord Armes, an ambulance officer with the service and a member of the union negotiating team, says there are three key issues in the dispute.

He cites wages, benefits, and the implementation of a paramedic or Advanced Life Support program by management, without remuneration for the employees, as the main points of contention.

"We are seeking parity with the Metro service," said Mr. Armes. That would mean an increase of \$4 per hour for the ambulance officers, currently making a top rate of \$13.94.

Mr. Armes says the latest contract offer by management was a two-year deal. Total hourly increase for the ambulance officers was \$1.06 over two years, with a raise twice during each year.

The union spokesperson says membership is also concerned over the "ad hoc" implementation of a paramedic/Advanced Life Support program by management, which requires ambulance officers to receive certification, but no increase in their pay.

"It started out as a pilot project in Burlington but it has since been expanded."

He said the pilot-project equipped ambulances operating in Burlington were to carry Military Anti-Shock Trousers, a device used to bring blood up from the lower extremities to the vital organs, and the pain killer Entonox. Sixteen officers were certified to use the drug and equipment.

"To become certified you have to spend a lecture session with a doctor, four hours in emergency and write an exam. All of this was scheduled on our time off."

Mr. Armes says the required certification has been extended throughout the district as the ambulances will soon be equipped with automatic defibrillators.

"I think that the certification is a great idea, and a big plus for the public, but the additional training and added responsibility should be reflected in our salaries."

"If management wants to implement a paramedic program, they should do it right, not in the way they have been." He said certification may be misleading to the public.

Mr. Armes says the membership is seeking a more attractive benefit package which would boost the current weekly indemnity for sickness or disability to 75 per cent of an employee's weekly salary.

The union spokesperson says the membership will be in a legal strike position if the conciliators file a no board report. He says they will strike if they must to achieve their goals.

Ron Liersch, assistant manager of the service, and a member of the management negotiating team, says the union is jumping the gun in bringing the dispute to the press.

"We are still in the preliminary stages of negotiating, and we have a long way to go before we should even talk about a strike," said Mr. Liersch. "I do not want to cause undue and premature fear and concern among the public."

"We are not anticipating a strike, and as it stands now one is not imminent."

There has not been a strike at the ambulance company since 1979, said Mr. Liersch. That strike lasted six weeks.

During that dispute supervisory and management personnel filled in for the ambulance officers. If there

is a strike in this issue, Mr. Liersch says there are nine members of management staff who could fill in. Union employees have been working without a contract since April 1.



Photo by JOHN WARREN

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