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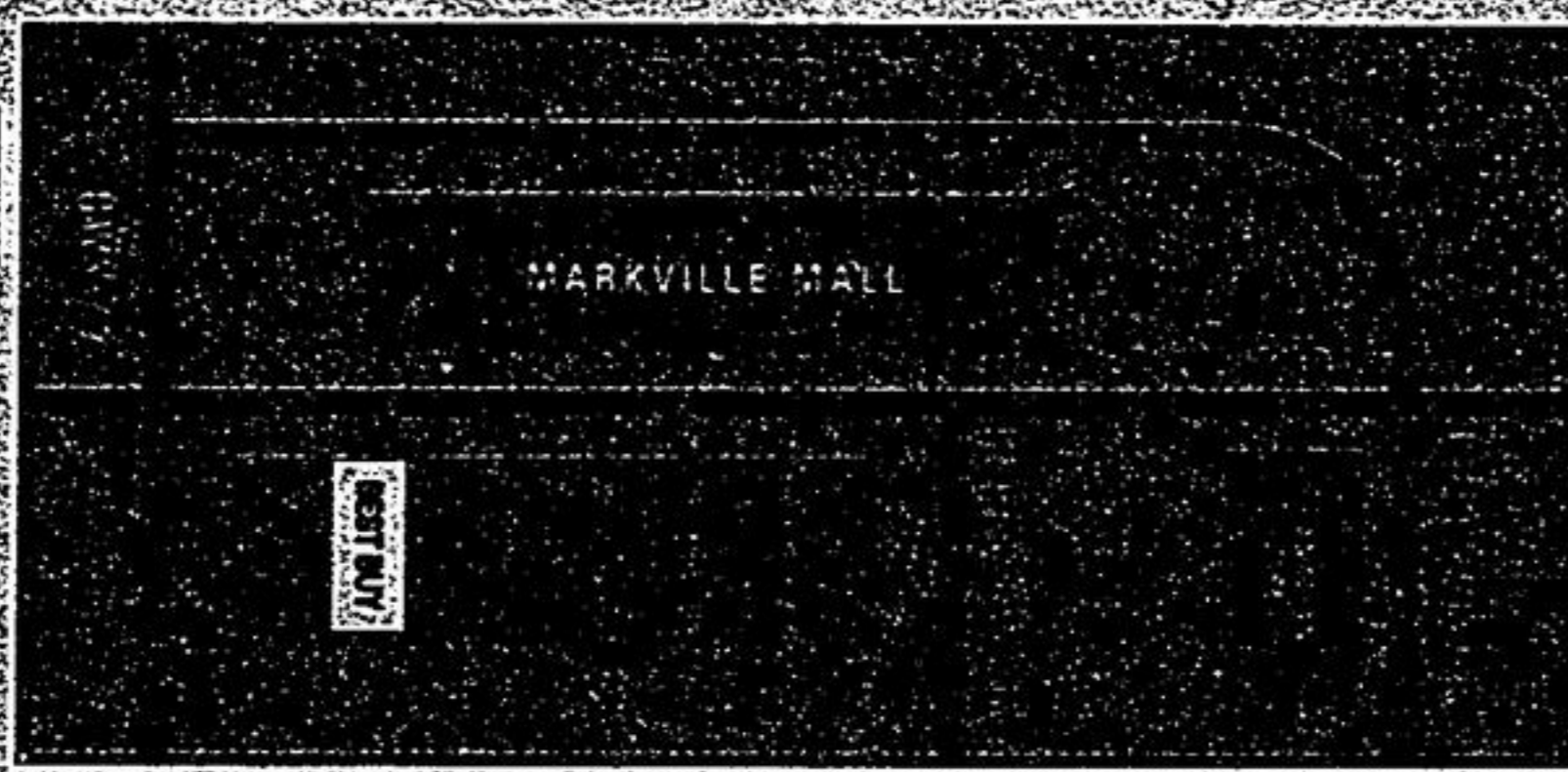


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LABOUR: Home builders' group seeks arbitration to end strike

Sheet metal workers reject contract

BY PATRICK CASEY
STAFF WRITER

The Greater Toronto Home Builders Association has asked the Ministry of Labour to impose binding arbitration to end a 13-week sheet metal workers strike.

On Tuesday, association president Mary Lawson wrote Labour Minister Jim Flaherty requesting he intervene in the dispute between 550 members of Local 285 of the Sheet Metal Workers International Association and the contractors, who are represented by the Toronto Residential Air Handling Group.

That decision came a day after union members rejected the contractors' offer by a 72-per-cent margin following a marathon bargaining session last weekend.

"We've put up with enough crap this summer," said Lawson. "We've had six strikes totalling 57 weeks of lost production time. We've had it."

Ironically, the home builders association finds itself aligned with the union, which has been pushing for arbitration for the past four weeks.

However, Bert Gardner, executive director of the air handlers group, said binding arbitration isn't necessary, since contract talks are already being mediated by a Ministry of Labour conciliator.

"I understand the frustration of the (home builders), but if the mediator felt the need for arbitration, he would have

said so," Gardner explained on Tuesday following a meeting with other contractors organizations.

"I have no problem with somebody else joining our talks, but you have to take the word 'arbitration' out of the equation. The items outstanding are complex and can be fairly expensive — and then you have somebody dictating the future of your industry."

Employees in the high-rise sector are paid by the hour, while residential workers are paid through an incentive plan.

The contractors were offering a \$2.25-an-hour wage increase over the next three years but upped their offer last week by an additional 45 cents. That would bring the workers' wages to almost \$35 an hour.

The union, however, is seeking a \$2.90-an-hour pay hike that is front-loaded, plus incentives to learn new technologies.

A series of strikes has stalled the building industry since the spring, forcing many home buyers to seek alternative arrangements as their closing dates are pushed further back.

Lawson, meantime, has urged all builders — including the sheet metal trade — to resume full production pending a decision from Flaherty.

"Our impatience is largely a reflection of our concern for the thousands of home buyers who, having endured the drywall, framing and other strikes, are now caught again," she added.



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